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**Unveiling the Sacred: Reading the Gendered Female Body in  
Contemporary Pakistani Fiction**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Philosophy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The last few decades mark the emergence of *the body* in Western social theory and humanities, where it is being used as a theoretical model and a critical construct to study, analyse and interpret socially situated subjectivities. This research project takes the theoretical framework of *the body* and combines it with insights from postcolonial feminist theory to critically engage with the depiction of the bodies of South Asian (Pakistani and Indian) women in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, a feminist voice from Pakistan. Using the approach of *the body* as an inscriptive surface, the narratives of *The Bride and Water* are critically examined to expose patriarchy's use of culture and religion as powerful tools to establish its hegemonic control over the bodies, subjectivities and lives of South Asian women. Questions of female objectification, marginalisation, socio-religious positioning and agency are the focus of this research, in an effort to highlight the corporeal and gendered existence of South Asian women in the context of Bapsi Sidhwa's novels.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa, the body, Pakistani literature, femininity

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## Research Supervision Statement

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Date: April 29, 2011.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to state that the research carried out for the Master's thesis entitled “*Unveiling the Sacred: Reading the Gendered Female Body in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction*” was completed by Shazrah Salam in the School of English and Media Studies, Massey University, New Zealand, under my direct supervision. This thesis material has not been used for any other degree. I played the following part in the preparation of the thesis: advising, providing feedback on writing, revising and editing.

Thesis Supervisor

Maria Celina Bortolotto

This is to state that the research carried out for the above named Master's thesis/research essay is my own work and has not been used for any other degree.

Student

Shazrah Salam

## Chapter 1

Ah, but the mystery of man is of the mind . . . whereas that of the woman is of the body. (Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*)

Men live in homes, women live in bodies. (Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days*)

One of the things you own in India along with your house and your buffalo or car is the woman. . . . So, when she is raped or brutalized, attacked, the men are not doing it only for carnal lust. . . . They're really demeaning that man and that man's tribe through the woman. They're enacting vendettas through her body. They are celebrating victories over her body. (Ritu Menon)

*Unveiling the Sacred: Reading the Gendered Female Body in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction* is not simply a study project undertaken to fulfil the requirements of a degree, nor is it a quest for the satisfaction of some academic curiosity; rather, it is a very personal, yet critical, engagement with the representation of the female body in Pakistani literary discourse. It is an engagement born out of the experiences of growing up (physically, mentally, emotionally and professionally) in a developing country where my existence as a woman is on one hand valorised as the symbol of piety, purity, love and honour; while on the other hand it is demeaned, shamelessly defiled and tortured in the name of morality, tradition and religion. It is born out of the experiences of walking down streets fully clothed/covered yet being made to feel that I was walking naked, reduced to the sum of my body part—breasts, hips and vagina—by the leering, hungry eyes of the men around me. It is born out of the constant professional struggle to prove that even as a woman, I am as intelligent, as capable and as qualified as (if not more so) my male colleagues, while having to juggle career and family at the same time.

But, more importantly, this project stems from the realisation of an agency and strength to stand against discrimination, sexism or bodily abuse that draws its inspiration from a long tradition of sacrifices, resistance and subversion (overt as well as covert) of women who as poets, writers, mothers, wives, political activists, teachers, doctors, academics, journalists and workers have, in their own way, stood against patriarchal hegemony. This project symbolises the effort to make sense of my identity

as a middle-class professional Pakistani woman—an identity that is continuously being (re)shaped by cultural, religious and political discourses, both local and international.

However personal this engagement, though, I am by no means alone in the effort to understand and theorise the complex and intersecting religious, political, social and economic forces that formulate and shape the category of third-world woman, especially in the religious and colonial historical context of South Asia (Pakistan and India). Historically speaking, the question of women and their bodies has always been central to the discourses between colonial and nationalist and Western and Islamist forces (Said; Malti-Douglas; Mohanty; Suleri; Saliba; Spivak; Sangari; Amireh; Saadallah; Afzal-Khan). Yet, within a postcolonial nation like Pakistan, the objects of this discourse had little say in what was being written or said about them. The current research project is a critical intervention in the manner of postcolonial feminist literary scholarship, undertaken by a feminist researcher from Pakistan, in which the author engages with questions of women's oppression, agency, resistance and positioning within the dominant religious and cultural discourses, as presented and contextualised in the fictional works of Bapsi Sidhwa, a feminist voice from Pakistan. A study of the representation of the female body in the literary fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa is undertaken with the understanding implicit in the Sheherazadian<sup>1</sup> narrative *One Thousand and One Nights* that the word (discourses) can have serious physical consequences (in her case, death). In other words, what a society declares and upholds in its discourses (religious, political, literary and cultural) directly affects the construction of women's identities, particularly the way they live and experience their bodies.

I have chosen to use the phrase *gendered body* in the title of my dissertation to highlight that the female body under investigation is a marked ideological and historical construct, whereas the male body has continued to exist and be discussed and (re)presented as gender-neutral, natural and value-free. I am well aware that the application of terms from Western feminist discourse such as *gender* or *the body* may seem a bit problematic. Postcolonial critics like Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak and Chandra T. Mohanty warn against any simplistic application of Western models for reading or analysing postcolonial subjectivities as they can prove to be dangerous,

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1. Sheherazade is a character in the Persian mythical story *One Thousand and One Nights*. She narrated stories every night to her sister in the presence of her husband, King Shehryar. Each morning she would leave the story at a climax so that the King allowed her to live another day to finish it.

particularly while dealing with issues of female agency and resistance. Spivak, for example, while comparing the discussion of third-world women in the nationalist and imperial discourses points out that the category of third-world woman, caught between the opposing discourses of exogenous imperialism and indigenous patriarchal forms, often fails to receive adequate attention and remains under-theorised within the postcolonial debates of resistance and oppression (Rehman 361). Spivak further argues that in contemporary discourses between the West and the Third World<sup>2</sup> the body of this woman makes continuous appearances in theory but often as a surface which is pulled and pushed, prodded and scraped to inscribe and win ideological wars: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (Spivak 304). However, in the absence of an indigenous critical theoretical model regarding the female body and sexuality, I believe that the Western epistemology of *the body* can be an effective tool to make a critical foray into the uncharted territory of the Pakistani female body and sexuality in literature. I hope that at the same time, my previous training as a postcolonial critic will help me avoid taking on the role of a cultural sell-out and Western informer, becoming complaisant in feeding the orientalist construction of Pakistani women as doubly effeminate, passive victims caught in the web of patriarchal and religious oppression. Being aware of the dangers involved in undertaking such a critical endeavour, I believe by positioning my analysis in the context of the indigenous cultural structures and historical milieu within which this gendered female body originated, developed and is being shaped, I will be able to generate a discussion that is not overtly simplistic but one that acknowledges the complex dynamics of the lives of South Asian women. Also, driven by the understanding that there is no such thing as *the body* but a body that is the product of a specific historical moment, intersected by the forces of race, colour,

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2. I am borrowing the concept of third-world women from Mohanty, who defines it as “an analytical and political category . . . [which] constitutes an ‘imagined community’ of third world oppositional struggles. ‘Imagined’ not because it is not ‘real’ but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries and ‘community’ because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world . . . [it signifies] ‘horizontal comradeship’ . . . [having] political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance” (4).

sexuality, ethnicity and class, I hope to avoid falling into the trap of an essentialist reading of the Pakistani female body in Sidhwa's fiction.

In the following sections, I will be presenting a detailed theoretical discussion of the notion of *the body*, followed by a contextualisation of Sidhwa's work within the literary canon of Pakistani literature. I have chosen to discuss in considerable detail the origin and development of the general idea of *the body* within Western philosophical and epistemological traditions because there are strong resemblances in the way the body has been thought of in the West and how it has been looked at in South Asian religious and socio-economic discourses. Furthermore, as South Asia was part of the British Empire, the residues, often subtle, of the Western epistemic traditions have been left in the fabric of the cultures of these societies. The doctrine of biological essentialism that has defined the bodies of Western women for a long time is also still prevalent and dominant in South Asian cultures. As in Western cultures, religious traditions in South Asia have been historically used by patriarchy to construct the bodies of women to be inferior, weak, unnecessarily and excessively passionate, along with being more susceptible to the influences of the baser physical desires like uncontrolled sex. Women in both cultures, Western and South Asian, have been made to suffer because of the materiality of their bodies. However, along with the similarities there are also considerable differences between the two contexts. While feminists in the West have struggled and moved beyond a heterosexual model and are more concerned with issues related to a body that forms a visible, visual part of the public sphere, the feminists in South Asia have been more focused on the heterosexual, domestic body of the South Asian woman, which is at stake because of economic dependence, poor health facilities, discriminating judicial systems, inheritance laws and lack of education. The feminists in South Asia are more concerned with trying to negotiate agency for women without having to compromise family and religion, two defining principles of South Asian cultures<sup>3</sup>. Mohanty, in *Feminism Without Borders*, suggests that finding similarities and looking for female solidarity, while grounding oneself firmly in experience, can be a significant strategy in building bridges across borders to successfully decolonise philosophical traditions and undertake an anticapitalist criticism of the phallogocentric, capitalist patriarchal structures all around the world (1-10).

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3. For details see the works by Ritu Menon; Urvashi Butalia; Kamla Bhasin; Kumkum Sangari; Madhu Kishwar; Nighat S. Khan; Munezza Shamsie; Amineh Ahmed; Shehnaz Khan; Fauzia Saeed; Fawzia Afzal-Khan.

The following discussion of *the body* is undertaken with Mohanty's belief of crossing boundaries by taking the best critical insights offered by Western philosophy and utilising them to question indigenous structures of patriarchal control in South Asian societies.

## **1.1 Skeleton in the Closet: *the Body* in Western Philosophy**

### ***1.1.1 Re-emergence of the Body in Western Social Theory***

Historically speaking, *the body* (particularly the female body) has existed as the marginal other in the Western philosophical tradition. However, in the last few decades *the body* has been brought back from oblivion into academia in the humanities and social sciences by theorists (anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, feminists) who are studying its role in mediating subjectivities, experiences, perceptions and power relationships in the postmodern society (Frank, "Bringing"; Bordo, *Unbearable*; Grosz, *Volatile*; Gatens; Davis; Turner; Fraser and Greco). Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco note that since the appearance of Bryan Turner's *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* in 1984, there has been an explosion of interest in studying *the body* in the social sciences and humanities as made evident through an ever-increasing number of publications and conferences on the topic (1). *The body* has been given a place in the curricula of colleges and universities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels as part of courses on gender, sexuality, sociology and anthropology<sup>4</sup>. The year 1995 marked the inception of a special interdisciplinary journal *The Body and Society* to further research on *the body*<sup>5</sup> in the social sciences and humanities. These more contemporary publications in the area of body-studies vary in nature and scope, ranging from sociological explorations of *the body* (Turner; Scott and Morgan; Shilling; Hancock; Hamilakis; Howson) to its (the body's) cultural studies (Featherstone et al.; Synott; O'Neill), explorations of body and sexuality (Fausto-Sterling; Kline) and philosophical (re)readings (Welton; Lakoff and Johnson). Interestingly, a key area of growth in research on *the body* has arisen from feminist interventions in the field of body-studies (Frank, "Bringing"; Frank, *Sociology*; Butler; Bordo, *Unbearable*; Grosz, *Space*; Grosz,

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4. Following are some of the universities offering courses on the body: The University of Auckland, "Anthropology of Body", and University of Reading, "MA in The Body and Representation."

5. *The Body and Society* is a peer-reviewed journal that has been published since March 1995 by Sage Publications as a companion journal to *Theory, Culture and Society*.

*Volatile*; Gatens; Conboy et al; Davis; Arthurs and Grimshaw; Cook; Shildrick and Price; Horner and Keane; Malacrida and Low; Lenon).

The body has constantly made appearances in Western theoretical discourses in the field of medicine or biological sciences, even during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, Turner is of the opinion that these earlier forms of discussion take up *the body* as an anatomical construct or a biological entity that does not play any active, significant role in the creation of self or *socially situated subjectivity*. In these discourses *the body* was a field of interest, investigation and theorisation for men of pure sciences (e.g., biology, medicine), who used the human anatomy or physiognomy to offer explanations of deviant behaviour, such as Freud-inspired physical accounts of psychological disorders (hysteria) or the use of Darwin's theories to identify physiological markers of criminals (Arthurs and Grimshaw 1-5). Discussions of *the body* in the humanities and social sciences in the past have been plagued by a strong somatophobia, which is the reason for its under-theorised status in these disciplines. Various reasons have been put forward to explain this relatively recent shift away from somatophobia and a return towards *the body* in Western social, political and philosophical realms. Some attribute this revival to a change in the cultural demography of Western societies, while others see it as a theoretical revivification (Davis 1; Hamilakis 2). Still others trace the roots of this revival to the works of Michael Foucault (*Discipline and Punishment* and *The History of Sexuality*) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), which foregrounded the correlation between identities, subjectivities and specific forms of embodiment, involving a complex power play. The main arguments that have been presented over the last two decades to explain the revitalisation of *the body* in Western humanities and social sciences are summed up in the following section.

Firstly, a key reason for the return of *the body* in the humanities and social sciences has been the rise of what Turner terms a "somatic society" (6) in the West; that is, a society in which key political and ethical matters are expressed and played out through the medium of *the body* (Fraser and Greco 2). Secondly, this resurgence has been facilitated in the West by the changeover from an industrial, capitalist economic structure to a postfordist one, resulting in the creation of a culture that celebrates leisure and consumption, transforming the previously upheld notions of a Puritan morality and the work ethic. The new post-industrial society not only gives legitimacy to

indulgences in bodily desires and pleasures, but it has come to see the previously disciplined body as a flexible material entity that can be changed, fashioned and moulded according to whatever one desires (Fraser and Greco 2; Davis 2; Hamilakis 2-5). Freed from puritan trappings and limitations in the new consumer culture, *the body* has become a centre of indulgence, a significant marker for people of all classes to express their individuality:

The imagery of consumer culture presents a world of ease and comfort, once the privilege of an elite, now apparently within the reach of all. An ideology of personal consumption presents individuals as free to do their own thing, to construct their own little worlds in the private sphere ‘however Lilliputian’. (Berger and Kellner qtd. in Featherstone 21)

In *Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* Anthony Giddens notes that the change from modernity to postmodernity is characterised by a corresponding alternation in the patterns of intimate relationships in the West, brought about in large part, by the legitimacy of bodily desires. Giddens theorises that in postmodernity, with the breakdown of heterosexual desire and gender role (femininity/masculinity) becoming more a question of an individual lifestyle rather than naturally created fixed categories, an individual’s sexuality has become an area of exploration and experimentation (regulated by the pursuit of bodily desires) connected to the endeavour of finding one’s true self/identity. Thus, as the ideal of romantic love is replaced by “confluent love” or “pure relationship” (58-65), *the body* takes centre stage in playing out intimacies, desires and emotions.

Thirdly, with medical advancements, particularly in the fields of genetics, cosmetic surgery and psychopharmacology, as well as a new-found preoccupation (veering on the edge of obsession) with disease prevention, anti-ageing and physical fitness, *the body* becomes the new ground to exercise and exert control. The rise in life expectancy has conversely fuelled an obsession with mortality and the means to stop/reverse the natural process of ageing, making *the body* the ultimate battleground in a race against time. The popularisation of certain body-types in the media and cultural discourses (for example the thin youthful female body or the muscular, well-toned male body) has also brought *the body* into the limelight. In a postmodern social set-up characterised by surgical transplants, genetic modifications, in-vitro fertilisation;

cosmetic surgeries such as liposuction and Botox treatments, and personalised fitness training programs, *the body* has thus emerged as the definitive “cultural metaphor for controlling what is within our grasp” (Davis 2; for details see also Bordo, *Unbearable*).

Fourthly, *the body*, in its materiality, has been particularly politicised by the various liberation movements of the post-1980s era. Movements like feminism, postcolonialism and civil rights for gay, lesbian and black people have helped highlight the role of *the body* in the creation of subjectivities, social and political positioning, and power relations. For example, exploring the relationship between racism and body, Sander Gilman highlights how the black body, particularly that of the black female, came to symbolise deviant sexuality, acting as “the other”<sup>6</sup> for the construction of a white middle-class heterosexual model as early as the eighteenth century. The nineteenth-century European exhibits of Sarah Bartmann or (popularly known as) the “Hottentot Venus” serve as an example of the female black body being used to signify a hyper-charged, lustful and most likely deviant model of sexuality: a practice that still continues to haunt postmodern cultural discourses (hooks 122–132). Furthermore, feminist critics have shown how the identification of women in terms of their corporeality has been used historically by patriarchy to subjugate women (Bordo, *Unbearable*; Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*; Gatens; Davis).

Arthur Frank (“Bringing”, *Sociology*) offers an alternative point of view about the recent revival of *the body* in humanities and social sciences. According to him the contradictory discourses of modernity and postmodernity, characterised by opposing impulses of certainty and uncertainty, are mainly responsible for this resurgence. On the one hand, he argues, modernity sees *the body* as a stable, unchanging material reality subject to scientific experimentation and fact-finding, providing ground for the Enlightenment belief in the transcendence of reason. And yet on the other, he points out, the diversification found in terms of outlook, behaviours, and attitudes in different cultures justifies theories advocating constructivism. A similar contradiction is also found in postmodern discourse. Whereas some postmodernist critics use the physicality of *the body* to attack the disembodied practices of the West, others following Foucault use it to show how power constitutes various subjectivities (Davis 4). Thus, the ontological positioning of *the body* as “reference point in a world of flux and the

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6. The concept of other has been taken from postcolonial theory meaning “the different”.

epitome of that same flux” ensures that *the body* remains in circulation (Frank, *Sociology* 40).

For the above stated reasons, today *the body* has emerged as a centralised concept in Western theorisation of socially situated subjectivity (Davis; Arthurs and Grimshaw; Frank, “Bringing”; Turner; Hamilakis et al.; Fraser and Greco).

### ***1.1.2 The Body in Traditional Western Philosophy***

The category of *the body* or *embodied subjectivity*, which today stands at the heart of various theoretical debates, has not always enjoyed this position of privilege. In fact, within the metaphysical and epistemological tradition of Western philosophy *the body* has existed in the margins, condemned to the status of a demonised other. For example, commenting on the intellectual and philosophical legacy of the West in the postmodern period, Elizabeth Grosz states that the West has been suffering from a “crisis of reason” (*Space* 25-27). She argued that the onset of this crisis was brought about because of the way knowledge has been traditionally or conventionally conceptualised as an objective, timeless collection of facts attainable through rigorous, disciplined modes of investigation, carried out by a neutral, disembodied mind. She is of the opinion that while Western philosophers and theorists have engaged with issues related metonymically with *the body* (such as identity, subjectivity and self) they have been, however, predominantly unwilling to consider that *the body* plays any significant role in the formulation of either knowledge or the subject’s identity (ibid). For traditional philosophers, the pursuit of knowledge was entirely a mental activity in which the mind of the researcher, above and beyond the corporeal realities of his body, was able to perceive objective truths. In fact, traditionally, any consideration of the materiality of the theorist’s body, such as colour, race or sex, was thought to contaminate the objectivity of the knowledge: “Not only is the Body deemed irrelevant in the production of knowledge, it is seen as potentially subversive” (Currie and Raoul 122). Theorists like Karl Marx and Foucault challenged and refuted this disinterested view by showing that knowledge is always politically invested and is never free from the interference or influence of an embodied subjectivity intersected by race, class and/or sex.

Similarly, critics like Jacques Derrida (Irwin 108) and Nancy Jay (38-56) have pointed out that the Western philosophical models are essentially logocentric, within

which epistemological and ontological information is always conceived and categorised in binary opposite terms. Derrida has gone on to argue, convincingly, that within this dualistic philosophical model each of the pairs is not simply placed against each other in mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. Rather these pairs form hierarchical structures in which the first term is privileged over the other, which then becomes inferior, derivative, incomplete and marginalised. Historically, the structure of the Western philosophical tradition privileges permanence over change. Consequently, the existence (whether theoretical, imaginative or metaphysical) of a single, universal and transcendental reality or truth becomes superior to the immediate, ever-changing and multiple realities of the material world. Preferring order over chaos, this tradition favours singularity over multiplicity, rationality over emotionality, activity over passivity and, most importantly, spirit or mind over body. As the various pairs are associated with each other through lateral alignment within this logocentric tradition and so fixed within a mutually exclusive value hierarchy of mind/body, *the body* is relegated to a secondary, derivative position of imminence, in contrast to and in favour of *the spirit* (later mind) that is pure, indivisible, capable of grasping eternal realities and discovering moral truths. The traditional definitions of *the body* conceptualise it either in terms of an association with nature, materiality, emotionality, imminence and prehistoric life or in opposition to the notions of mind, self and subjectivity. While *the mind* has been understood to be sexually neutral, *the body* has been presented as an ahistorical, acultural, and biologically fixed entity that has to be controlled and transcended in order for mankind to discover truth, experience enlightenment and create a harmonious, egalitarian and just society. *The body*, like other biological and/or organic elements tied to the physical and material world of nature, has been considered to be immune to the incursions of history, culture or society, and like these organic animals and plants, it has been subjected to the scientific study, manipulation and control of the natural sciences (Grosz, *Space*; Grosz, *Volatile*; Bordo, *Unbearable*; Synott; Gatens; Davis; Shildrick; Fraser and Greco; Currie and Raoul; Orr et al; Turner).

Philosophy and religion, supplemented by medical discourse, are the two major sources of Western knowledge about *the body*. For most of the above-cited theorists/critics the Cartesian project of Enlightenment during the seventeenth century, with its (renewed) emphasis on the mind/body split, not only marks the beginning of modernism in Western history, but is also mainly responsible for the somatophobia that

has plagued Western metaphysics ever since. However, as noted by Anthony Synott and Elizabeth Spelman, even before the onset of Cartesian somatophobia, classical Western philosophy displays traces of rejection of the body. Among the Greeks, the Hedonists favoured an active pursuit of bodily or physical pleasures, while the Epicureans, although advocating a philosophy of “Eat, drink and be merry”, still believed that mental pleasures were more important than the ones obtained merely from the physical senses. The Orphists advanced the philosophy of “*soma-sema*”, declaring *the body* to be a tomb of the soul. Plato displays a slight ambivalence towards the mind/body split. In his lectures he articulates a love of *Beauty* exhibited in the physical world (thus of the human body as well), seeing it as a principle that can lead one towards the ultimate truth, the Absolute Transcendental Signifier. He also believed that, hypothetically speaking, both men and women have equal abilities to engage in this pursuit of higher moral truths. Yet, at the same time, he repeatedly argues in his *The Republic* that *the body* with its sensory apparatus can be easily ensnared in the world of sensations and as such cannot be solely trusted and that only a rational mind possesses the ability to grasp eternal realities. He emphasises on philosophers to educate and train their minds and not to be deceived by their bodies. Concurrently, he also thinks that men are better suited than women, by nature, to take on the task of discovering the truths of life. Aristotle rejects *the body* in favour of *the mind*, seeing the latter as the driving force behind life and declaring rationality to be the defining characteristic of human beings.

In Christianity, the other important source of Western knowledge about *the body*, the ancient opposition of mind versus body in philosophy (or the Greco-Roman debate between desire and form) became translated as a division between flesh and spirit. Implicated as cause in the story of the Original Sin and man’s subsequent fall from grace, the previously metaphysical debate surrounding *the body* became a moral one. Thus, in the Judeo-Christian religious discourses *the body* with its materiality, desires and pleasure-seeking tendency was often perceived as a hindrance in reaching spiritual eminence. The instincts, drives and emotions *the body* experienced caused human beings to sin and thus pushed them towards damnation and destruction. Like the Orphists, Christian theologians thought of *the body* as a snare that entrapped the eternal soul into the material world of the flesh, making one forget about eternity and salvation. In order to achieve salvation, a true Christian was to discipline and purge his body by subjecting it to intense moral control. Hence, the majority of the Christian texts and/or

sermons discussed *the body* in highly antagonistic terms. Even the most favourable religious accounts of *the body* saw it as a mundane path to achieve a higher spiritual status. For instance, St. Paul claimed that the “Body is the temple of the Holy Spirit”. This theological rejection of *the body* helped to further push it towards marginality in the metaphysical world. During the late medieval period the Roman philosophy of stoicism became highly influential in shaping the thought and attitudes of the Christian theologians and philosophers. The popularisation of the thoughts of Stoic thinkers like Epictetus who claimed that “When a human being is born, two constitutive elements are brought together in coexistence, one is derived from the animals, namely the flesh, whereas the other comes from God, namely the soul”, and Marcus Aurelius who asserted “Death is a welcome freedom from the servitude to the demands of the body, the pains of hunger, the allure of the senses and the digressions of the intellect”, furthered the split between mind and body, privileging the former over the latter.

The middle ages were also dominated by the notion of a hierarchically arranged universe, a belief most commonly known as *scala naturae* (literally the ladder or staircase of nature) or “The Great Chain of Being” (Schumaker 102). It had God at the top and the inanimate organic forms at the bottom, while the human beings formed a link between the spiritual and the organic worlds in the chain. This belief presented a dualistic model of human beings, stating (like Epictetus) that humans are created with elements belonging to both the worlds: rationality which joins us to the world of permanence and eternal truths, and emotions which link us with animals. The popular belief of that time purported that if human beings led a life dictated and controlled by rationality, they could rise above the world of materiality (imperfection) and become closer to God, whereas, if they allowed their emotions (bodily desires, instincts, drives) to take control, they would fall from grace and be reduced to the position of animals. Hence *the body*, with its appetites and demands, became demonised as the cause of the fall from grace. It was raw nature that had to be tamed and controlled through the rational mind in order to create a harmonious society on earth, mirroring the order of the universe. Exerting this control was also a moral imperative so one’s eternal bliss could be ensured.

The philosophies of Rene Descartes (1596–1650) and the empirical positivist approach of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) put forward during the seventeenth century mark the beginning of the modern period in the history of the West. The Cartesian

philosophical model radicalised the mind/body divide by discarding spirit in favour of a more empirical notion of mind and by, for the first time, advancing a mechanistic view of nature and the human body that looked at the construction and functioning of the natural world in terms analogous to that of the machine. Similarly, unlike their medieval predecessors who thought Nature as reflective of some divine or superior order and studied it with awe/respect to learn from it, both Descartes and Bacon saw the natural world as a world of opportunities to be exploited, experimented upon and harnessed for utilitarian purposes. Referring to the great mechanical advancements in the fields of literature (printing), warfare (gunpowder) and navigation (compass) of his age Bacon, in his “*Nova Organum*” (1620), documents the exhilarating possibilities that can take effect once nature (*the body*) is subordinated to the empirical method of investigation (rational thought) paired with mechanical advancements: “They [men of knowledge] do not, like the old, merely exert a gentle guidance over nature’s course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations. [Under the new scientific, mechanical mode of inquiry] Nature betrays her secrets more fully [. . .] than when in enjoyment of her natural liberty” (qtd. in Merchant 172). Thus, the philosophical treatises of Bacon and Descartes introduced the inquirer to the role of a conqueror who, with the help of his rational mind, had to overtake the material, physical world in order to gain knowledge and partake in the progress of human society. Their project of Enlightenment had at its heart an autonomous human subject, who, by dominating the embodied reality of his existence, was able to create a progressive egalitarian society through the process of rational, scientific thinking:

Descartes maintained that mind exists independently of bodily need and individual experience. He posited through the experience of reason, the thinker could acquire a view of the world which transcends its point of origin. Knowledge achieved through Cartesian reason was thus called objective, in that it is severed from emotional and political considerations, and universal in that it is able to assume a “bird’s eye” view of the social world. From this perspective the knower, like an omnipotent god, comes from “no-where”. (Currie and Raoul 122)

The Cartesian formulations not only marked the beginning of the rejection of *the body* as an obstacle to pure reason in modern Western metaphysics but, more importantly, they clearly created a binary opposition between mind and body,

privileging the former over the latter. Furthermore, for centuries to come, Descartes set forth a model of the true philosopher/man of knowledge, which was defined by a sexually neutral mind and a disembodied subjectivity. The subordination of *the body*, of nature, came to be justified in the name of the quest for truth and objective knowledge. Moreover, while *the mind*, through its association with rationality and abstract truth, became part of the philosophical/metaphysical discourses, *the body*, with its corporeal connections, became part of the discourses of biology and other natural sciences, which were entrusted with the duty of discovering the reality of *the body*. The medicalisation of *the body* as a result of the Cartesian divide made anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and literary artists impervious to seeing the *body* as a viable reality actively shaping the understanding and perception of subjectivities, human interactions, social structures and even ideological standpoints.

For Moira Gatens, the seventeenth century possesses historical significance in the mind/body debate because it was the site of two significant births: first of the autonomous human subject and also of what she calls the “modern body politics” (21). The latter refers to the modern system of political governance which “. . . conceives of the political life as a state created by a contract, entered into by rational decision, and designed to ensure the protection and safety of the body and its needs” (3). Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) voiced this idea in *Leviathan* (1650) in the form of his social contract theory, which stated that allowing individuals to live their lives according to their desires, instincts and passions or in a “state of nature” would create discord and anarchy at all levels (Gatens 23). To avoid this destruction, individuals must submit their natural dispositions to a social contract so that a civil society, governed by a rational sovereignty, can be formulated. Sigmund Freud, in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), articulates the similar idea that the birth of human civilisation is not possible without frustrating the natural inclinations of people (qtd. in Fraser and Greco 10). Thus, another extension of the mind/body split is formulated in the form of an antagonism between culture and nature, which hypothesises that within the political/social realm the individual’s body is the site of an anti-social desire (Turner 38) that always threatens to break loose and destroy the very fabric of society, and against which a rationally constituted and governed political system offers the only security.

The notion of the non-consequentiality of *the body* in the production of knowledge and/or creation of subjectivity has been questioned and attacked in various

quarters since the nineteenth century. The validity of the autonomous, sexually neutral and rationally acting subject of the Enlightenment was seriously questioned by the psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). His theories about the psychosexual development of personality and the role of unconsciousness in impacting our action and behaviours initiated debates that brought issues of embodiment to the forefront. The works of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) were also influential in politicising *the body* as they shed light on the systematic exploitation of the bodies of workers in bourgeois capitalist societies. Norbert Elias's (1897–1990) theory of social figuration opened up the discourse on the social control of bodies, as he showed that changes in the political structure of Renaissance society resulted in the creation of subtle and covert means of manipulating and controlling disruptive bodies. The internalisation of the socially defined ethical values created a system of self-reflexive meditation that successfully monitored and moulded the manifestation of undesirable bodily actions. The theories of Foucault (1926–1984) further helped to politicise the notion of *the body*, particularly in the postmodern context. Foucault introduced the notion of bio-power, in which he established a direct correlation between the regulation of *the body* and the mechanisms of power at work in a society. He was of the opinion that the ways in which bodies are treated, controlled and manipulated can be read as reflective of how power is organised and utilised within a particular cultural set-up. Building on the theories of Marx, Max Weber, Elias, Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) formulated the concepts of *habitus* and *capital* to highlight how the social positioning of people within societies was directly affected by the embodied qualities of their bodies. “For both Foucault and Bourdieu the structure of the society—in Foucault's case its power relations, in Bourdieu's its class relations—is literally inscribed upon and reflected by individual bodies” (Malacrida and Low 3). Since the late 1980s, along with these theorists, powerful critiques of the Cartesian notion of a disembodied knowledge have come from feminist theorists, who have redefined *the body* as a site of power contestation and as an active agent in the creation of subjectivity (Gatens; Grosz, *Space*; Grosz, *Volatile*; Bordo, *Unbearable*; Currie and Raoul; Davis; Shildrick).

## 1.2 Women, Bodies and Philosophy

The traditional definitions and constructions of mind and body within Western metaphysics have been questioned and problematised by feminists who saw them as a source of female oppression. They have argued that the somatophobia echoed within the dualistic ontological and epistemological model of the West has proven to have serious ramifications for women. As the opposing pairs situated within the binary system of Western philosophy are functionally associated with each other through lateral alignments, the Cartesian mind/body split results in the creation of other epistemological associations and classifications, particularly that of male/female, culture/nature, through which men are defined in terms of their minds or rational abilities while women are reduced to mere bodies. While transcendence and intellectual pursuits became gendered as a male legacy, the leaky bodies of women with the ability to become pregnant, give birth, lactate and menstruate were gendered into potentially disruptive, volatile bodies, in need of constant surveillance and control (of and by men): “Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal and more natural than men” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 14). Men have bodies in a matter-of-fact, non-consequential way; their materiality starts with the organs, blood and bones of their bodies and ends at the skin. Thus, men “appear to *possess* a body but not *be* a body” (Greco and Fraser 16, original italics). Women, on the other hand, are construed to be ruled by their physiological processes in such a way that possession and exercise of rationality is not possible. The historical justification of this reduction and definition of women in terms of their physiological taxonomies is based on the reproductive functionality of the female body.

[Patriarchy has rationalised] male domination in terms of [the] fragility, unreliability, or biological closeness to nature attributed to the female body and the subordinate character attributed to women on account of the close connection between female psychology and biology. Women have been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body . . . patriarchal conceptions of the body [that] have served to establish an identity for women in essentialist, ahistorical and universalist terms. (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* xiv)

The androcentric societies of the Western world objectify women in the roles of procreators and nurturers on the basis of their physiology, while the association of *the body* with materiality and the biological world in philosophy hides the constructivism of this social positing of women. Thus, the social, cultural, aesthetic, ethical and theoretical positions of women are construed in relation to the limitations, possibilities, functionalities, inadequacies and frailties of their bodies. The structuring of men and women in the form of a mind/body hierarchy generates an entire set of associative binary terms that consequently signify the innate, defining qualities of the behaviours and attitudes of both men and women. Men are characterised as naturally active, rational, strong, circumspect, prudent and serious while women are seen as passive, emotional, weak, impulsive, foolish and talkative. Not only this, but within the logocentric tradition of knowledge women are aligned with all that is (predominantly) derivative, secondary or negative, like passivity, emotionality, and susceptibility to evil. This phallogocentric system of thought creates a social structure in which men, positioned at the centre as *subjects*, possess power whereas women are not only deprived of agency but are marginalised as mere *objects* in social, political, economical and religious discourses. It is not surprising, therefore, that critics like Turner theorise the Cartesian mind/body split as marking the beginning of “cultural patriarchy” in the West (38).

The devaluation of women in terms of their bodies can be traced back to the Greco-Roman philosophical traditions inherited by the West, along with the religious (Judeo-Christian) discourses and the medicalisation of the human body. Discussions about the probable dualistic nature of the universe occupy a significant position in the treatises of various Greek philosophers like Anaximander, Pythagoras, Parmenides and, most notably, Aristotle. Aristotelian notions about this dualism, particularly about women, their bodies and roles in society, proved to be highly influential in shaping the thoughts of philosophers and Christian theologians in subsequent centuries. Aristotle, in the fourth century BC, declared woman to be a “misbegotten man”, an “impotent male”, their existence a “natural monstrosity”:

The female, in fact, is female on account of an inability of a sort, viz. it lacks the power to concoct semen [...] Now of course [in conceiving] the female, *qua* female is passive, and the male is active [...] Wherever possible and so far as possible the male is separate from the female, since

it is something *better* and more divine in that it is the principle of movement for generated things, while the female serves as their matter . . . [W]e should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature. [Moreover] the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and rational element over the passionate is natural expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always harmful. (qtd. in Currie and Raoul 2; LeGates 22; Sydie 3; Synott 42-45)

In *Economics*, Aristotle created a powerful system of social symbolism in which men were associated with strength and courage, procuring an active life in the public sphere, whereas women were identified as cautious, weak nurturers who were better suited for a passive life inside the house (ibid). Like Aristotle, Aelius Galenus (popularly known as Galen of Pergamon), whose views were to dominate Western medical discourse well into the eighteenth century, also defined the male physiology to be the norm, declaring the bodies of women to be faulty, deficient and weak. Interestingly, he linked the physiological lack of women's bodies with their intellectual inferiority. He stated that the cold and wet humours of women's bodies prevented the blood from reaching the brain due to which they remained intellectually inferior: "Unlike the inferiority of slaves, who were seen to lack judgment because of their unfree status, or of male children, who lacked it because of their age, female inferiority was inherent" (qtd. in LeGates 19).

This ideology of physiologically-based inferiority of women's bodies was to haunt them repeatedly. The rational infirmity of women, postulated by the Greco-Roman thinkers, was transformed and popularised as a moral deficiency during the medieval age through the religious discourses of Saint Augustine (fifth century BC) and Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century BC). The story of Adam committing the original sin after being tempted by Eve, based on the account of the creation in Genesis 2, was commonly told in congregations as a testimony to prove that women were wrong-doers, temptresses of the flesh, transgressors of Divine law, morally weak, the doorway to evil and a serious threat to any attempt at salvation by men. This account also became a justification for women's subservience to men because of their lack of judgment or control, and their emotionality. Christian theological tradition abounds with misogynistic descriptions of women and their bodies. Tertullian (160-230) admonished

women saying, “Do you not know that you are Eve? You are the devil’s gateway; you are the she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God” (qtd. in Synott 45). For John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantine, the woman was a dangerous temptation created by nature, with an evil predisposition that enticed men with the beauty of their flesh. Albert the Great<sup>7</sup> declared that:

Woman is less qualified [than man] for moral behaviour . . . knows nothing of fidelity. . . . Woman is a misbegotten man and has a faulty and defective nature. . . . One must be on one’s guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and the horned devil. Her feelings drive men towards evil, just as reason impels man towards all good. (qtd. in Ranke-Heinemann 96)

Thomas Aquinas justified the superiority of men by stating that “. . . the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and the end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature” (qtd. in Synott 46). Furthermore, Aquinas has been documented as expressing an intense dislike of sex, calling it brutish and animalistic. The labelling of women as morally weak, naturally prone to evil and possessing a lustful body proved instrumental in the victimisation of women during the witch-hunts that dominated the Middle Ages. Women formed an overwhelming majority of the eight million infidels and misbelievers executed at that time, because of the belief that they are: “naturally more impressionable and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit . . . [being] feebler in mind and body. [. . .] All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable” (Currie and Raoul 3).

Similarly, in the legal discourses of the West, from the earliest written Greek and Roman codes to legislation passed as late as the Victorian Age, the bodies of women have been, quite literally, conceived of as possession/property belonging to men. In Babylonian law, for example, rape was treated as a form of property damage, requiring the rapist to pay a fine to the husband/father, but no compensation was given to the woman. An eighteenth century encyclopaedia of England documents the legal status of a non-slave English woman (a woman was not expected to be independent/free

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7. St. Albert Magnus, also known as Albert the Great, was a Dominican friar from Germany who lived in the Middle Ages. He is popular for his advocacy of a peaceful relationship of mutual cooperation between the Church and science.

as the law decreed that she was not to be left without a benefactor or guardian for her own protection) as much closer to property in comparison to that of a non-slave English man. After marriage, an eighteenth century English woman lost any right to own or bestow property, make contracts or sue legally on her own, hold custody of minor children or keep wages she earned. Her husband was legally permitted to beat her and had full, unquestionable access and control over her sexual services (Weitz 4).

During the nineteenth century Darwin's scientific theories were translated into a Social Darwinism that provided scientific, medical rationalisation of women's inferior bodies. Darwin argued that men competed against other men for sexual access, with the result that winners successfully reproduced. Consequently, men continuously evolved towards greater perfection. Females, on the other hand, were not subjected to the same process of natural selection as they did not compete with males. He also argued that the bulk of women's energies was exhausted during reproduction and they retained little or no energy for physical or mental development: "Women remain subject to their emotions, and passions: nurturing, altruistic and child-like, but with little sense of either justice or morality" (Darwin, qtd. in LeGates 22). A major factor that allowed the bodies of women to be continuously portrayed in a misogynist light was the traditional exclusion of women from the process of knowledge production, particularly in the fields of philosophy and pure sciences. The first sustained challenge to the male-stream epistemological and ontological tradition, particularly to the construct of a sexually neutral, disembodied subject of Cartesian Enlightenment, came with the induction of women into Western academia and especially through the institutionalisation of Women's Studies in universities, the official locations of knowledge generation.

Although the beginning of the formal struggle for female emancipation can be traced back to the publication of such ground-breaking works as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and John Stuart Mills's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and the initiation of the suffrage movement, *the body* only became politicised when struggle ensued between the state and female activists over the reproductive rights of women. Extending the concept of political liberty to include having control over one's body, these female activists demanded that women should have control over their bodies in terms of birth, abortion and other issues related to fertility (Davis 4). In Britain, the female body was brought into the limelight with Josephine Butler's (1828–1906) campaign for abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act,

established by the British Government during the 1860s. Butler claimed that this law, which decreed prostitutes should be subjected to genital examination to stop the spread of venereal diseases in the British armed forces, was a violation of the women's rights over their bodies. Butler claimed that women, like men, as free members of the country should be given political liberty and autonomy over their bodies. Butler was joined by a large number of women and men who protested against this discriminatory law and it was finally abolished by the British Government in 1886.

In the 1960s and 70s, feminists like Shulamith Firestone, Marly Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Germaine Greer, Anne Koedat, Barbara Omolade, Adrienne Rich and Angela Davis took the metaphor of "body politics" created by Thomas Hobbes<sup>8</sup> to refer to the political organisation of a civil society and inverted it to claim that the female body was a social construction. These women asserted that "... the body itself [is] a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control—from foot binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality" (Bordo, *Feminism* 179). This inversion marks the birth of what today is commonly referred to as "Politics of the Body" (Gatens 50-55). These feminists emphasised that unlike the traditional definitions that classified *the body* (particularly the female body) as an ahistorical, static, stable biological entity set against a politically charged, continuously evolving culture, *the body* itself was a cultural artifact: shaped, moulded and signified within a social set-up that was always specific to time and space. The term "politics of the body", thus, problematises the construction of *the body* as a simplistic monolithic category, indicating that it is a dynamic construct born out of the intersecting complex religious, socio-economic and political forces at work in a society within a specific historical milieu:

The body, or rather bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them but are the products, direct effects of the very social constitution on nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to the historical, social and cultural exigencies (while it

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8. Hobbes and his successors used the analogy of the body to discuss the creation and organisation of a (motherless) civil society, (fathered and) governed by a rational head comprising institutions that functioned like the limbs and organs of the human body.

remains basically the same); these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determined type. (Grosz *Volatile Bodies* x)

The realisation that *the body* is a cultural construct led feminists to raise their voice against the social normalisation of women's bodies into particular roles through various socio-cultural, medical, legal, political and religious institutions (Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*; Mitchell, *Women's Estate*). Simon de Beauvoir drew a distinction between "gender" and "sex", postulating *the body* to be a historical construct, with the male and female roles being socially mediated and asymmetrically constructed for the advantage of men, under the false pretence of being assigned biologically or naturally:

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on a legal paper. In actuality the relation of the sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (qtd. in Currie and Raoul 2)

The various contemporary Western theories conceptualising *the body* as an epistemological category can be roughly grouped together into three main categories: the egalitarian perspective, the essentialist representation, and the postmodern/poststructuralist constructions. The first two perspectives correspond to the *same vs. different* approach often taken to transcribe the sexual difference between men and women. Given the reduction of women to their bodies, the essentialist biological gendering of their roles and exclusion from eminence due to the materiality of their bodies, it is not surprising that feminists initially exhibited reluctance to engage with theorisation of women in terms of their bodies.

The earliest group of philosophers/critics to formally engage in feminist renderings of the female body belonged to the ranks of second-wave feminism. These feminists, including de Beauvoir and Firestone, rejected *the body* in favour of *the mind*, while emphasising the equality of men and women's mental and intellectual abilities. De Beauvoir famously called the female body "a carnivorous swamp" (49, 52), while others saw the procreative abilities of women as burdensome and a cause of oppression. In contrast to this masculine somatophobic rejection, the next group of feminists,

including Adrienne Rich, took an essentialist approach by venerating the female reproductive ability: “Procreation was seen as a gift of nature to be fiercely guarded against the incursions of biotechnology and other similar medical advancements” (Price and Shildrick 4).

Inspired by Foucault’s theory of bio-power, *the body* took a centralised role in the feminist projects of the 1980s and 90s. Assuming an anti-essentialist position, *the body* itself and not merely gender roles came to be viewed as a prime locus of struggle for power as well as a cultural artifact that plays a significant role in the production of subjectivities, identities and, particularly, knowledge (Bartky; Bordo, *Unbearable*; Grosz, *Volatile*; Price and Shildrick): “As pliable flesh, the body is the unspecified raw material of social inscription *that produces subjects as subjects of a particular kind* [original emphasis]” (Grosz, *Space* 32). In the past few decades, especially since the appearance of Judith Butler’s groundbreaking works like *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) feminists have come to strongly dispute the (essentialist ) presence of *the body* within theory. They postulate that what we know and understand as “the body” is, in fact, a discursive construction, institutionalised and naturalised through repetitive discourses: “The deployments of the body through acts and gestures, especially in terms of gendered sexuality, are, through a process of reiteration, productive of a discursive identity that is both open and constrained” (Price and Shildrick 9). Like Foucault, Butler views discourse as constitutive of the reality that it is reporting. Butler does not claim to reject the physicality of *the body*, rather she claims that what we understand of that materiality or how we give meanings to it (for example the heterosexuality of desire) is always mediated: “There is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 10). For Spivak, our conceptions of *the body* “[are] thinkings of the systematicity of the body, they are value codings of the body. The body as such cannot be thought” (Spivak, qtd. in Price and Shildrick 8).

Accounts of *the body* have also been crucial in developing critiques of knowledge. Feminists have used these accounts to question the disembodiment of male-authored knowledge, and the presence of a unified, asexual human subject:

Identified primarily with the rational mind, this subject appears to possess a body but not to *be* a body, and it is this split (between body and mind/self) that renders it ‘possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, ethnicity’. (Hayles qtd. in Fraser and Greco 16, original italics)

Similarly, Black feminists like bell hooks, Linda Martin Alcoff, Sander Gilman, Robert Gooding-William, and Patricia Hill Collins (Gordon and Gordon 120-126) have used *the body* to criticise the privileging of the white, heterosexual, middle-class female body within the Western feminist discourse:

Focusing primarily on raced and gendered identities, [Alcoff] makes clear the way in which bodily features (colour, hair, nose, breasts, genitals) are invested with a significance which becomes a part of our immediate perceptual experience of them. “Both race and sex . . . are most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena and determinant of economic and political status.” (Lennon 6.2)

More recently, feminists have used the notion of a discursive, socio-culturally constructed *body*, intersected and marked by class, ethnicity, sexuality, colour, and race within a specific historical milieu as a lens for conducting active conversations with different aspects of the lives of women. This has resulted in a plethora of studies that cover a variety of interests, like issues related to fertility, reproduction, menstruation, menopause, explorations of sexuality, disability, and health, including eating disorders; and the biological normalisation of women’s bodies. Through these inter-disciplinary collaborations, feminists have worked to establish a comprehensive theory of embodiment that uses *the body* to study, analyse and interpret socially situated subjectivities including, but not limited to, accounts of the construction of sexualities, gender and ethnicities. At the same time they provide productive insights into the dynamics of the specific (social/cultural/historical/political/religious/economic) processes that produce and mark bodies with particular significations within a society: “What is required, and what has emerged over subsequent years, is a theory of embodiment that could take account not simply of sexual difference but of racial

difference, class difference and differences due to disability; in short the specific contextual materiality of the body” (Price and Shildrick 5).

The contemporary theoretical approaches used in Western humanities and to study or analyse *the body* can be roughly grouped into two broad categories. The first approach constructs the body as “an inscriptive surface”, while the second group of theories takes “the lived body” approach. The first approach of looking at *the body* as an inscriptive surface has been derived from the theoretical works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka, Michael Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Their accounts of the construction and functioning of *the body* have been reworked, modified and expanded for feminist applications in the fields of cultural studies, philosophy, ethics, social sciences and arts by Susan Bordo, Moira Gatens, and Elizabeth Grosz. This approach sees *the body* as a surface that is inscribed on by cultural, sexual, racial, religious, ethical, and political forces to produce particular kinds of subjectivities. It studies a body which is social and public, and is concerned with deciphering the ways in which “the subject is marked, scarred, transformed, written upon or constructed by various regimes of institutional, discursive and non-discursive power as particular kind of body” (Grosz, *Space* 33). On the other hand, the lived body approach has been mainly popular in psychology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. The most notable proponent of this perspective has been Judith Butler, a post-structural feminist from the United States. Butler argues that what we understand to be sex, sexuality, gender and *the body* are in fact cultural artifacts that have been stylised into their current significations or epistemological categories through repetitive actions across history. Advancing the idea of performativity, this approach sees *the body*, gender or sexuality residing in the lived experience of the individual. The individual does not create sex or gender through performance as an autonomous subject; rather it is the very act or performance that constitutes or produces an individual’s subjective experience of gender, body or sexuality. According to her, this performativity or the ritualistic stylised repetitions always take place under the influence and control of social or cultural norms. The fear of becoming a social or cultural outcast compels the individual to produce socially acceptable performances and rewards the individual by attaching positive signification to the subjective experience:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not

performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo. (Butler *Bodies* 95)

Thus, the lived body approach refers to the lived experiences of *the body*, to ways *the body* is experienced and made meaningful. It takes as its object the inner schema of *the body*, its lived interiority, in an effort to map its anatomical construction.

The current project uses the first approach, of *the body* as an inscriptive surface to frame the analysis of the female body in Sidhwa's fiction. My working definitions of female body are drawn from the work of Grosz (*Volatile Bodies*) and Rosi Braidotti (*Nomadic Subjects*). *The body*, as I see it, is a systematic physical structure of bones, nerves, skin, tissue, veins and organs which takes the meaning of a human body, possessing the shape and space of the psyche, through the intervention and inscription of a language and a social order. A more detailed definition that will be used is given by Braidotti:

In the feminist framework, the primary site of location is the body. The subject is not an abstract entity, but rather a material embodied one. The body is not a natural thing, on the contrary, it is a culturally coded socialized entity. Far from being an essential notion, it is the site of intersection of the biological, the social and the linguistic, that is, of language as the fundamental symbolic system of a culture. Feminist theories of sexual difference have assimilated the insight of mainstream theories of subjectivity to develop a new form of 'corporeal materialism' that defines the body as an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting forces where multiple codes are inscribed. (238)

The approach of looking at *the body* as an inscriptive surface is of particular advantage to me, as I am not merely interested in analysing the representations of the material female body in Sidhwa's fiction. I am particularly interested in working out the dynamics involved in the materialisation and signification of the female body in Sidhwa's novel and in tracing the socio-religious or historical factors that generate its particular positioning and form. Before proceeding to analyse Sidhwa's fiction, the

following section will situate Sidhwa in the wider context of Pakistani Literature in English and introduce readers to her novels, which will be critically examined in subsequent chapters.

### **1.3 Women Writers and Pakistani Literature in English**

The ever-increasing influx of South Asians into Western countries for educational, economic or settlement purposes; the notoriously popularised discourse of “The War on Terror” in the wake of the 9/11 events; the oscillations in the delicately balanced relationship between Pakistan and India (the two recent additions to the world’s nuclear family) and the foray of Bollywood (Indian) cinema in the West through the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*, are some of the factors that have resulted in an increased visibility of South Asia in international media. Apart from this heightened cultural and political presence, South Asia (synonymous with India) has also captured the attention of literary circles in the West, as books by South Asian (Indian?) writers (either natives or of South Asian origin) like Rushdie, Mukherjee, Roy and Naipaul have consistently appeared in lists of best-sellers and award winning books in the West. These works have also found their way into Western academia as part of courses on third world/commonwealth/postcolonial literature(s) in general, or in relation to women writers from these parts in particular.

Interestingly, either the existence of English literature from Pakistan in anthologies, historical, or critical companions, is conflated with Indian literature, or its identity is subsumed within its larger, more well-known counterpart. However, since 2000 this situation has begun to change as the literary and creative genius of more and more Pakistani writers is internationally recognised and as a growing number of books, either written originally in English or translated from local languages, are appearing in Western markets and are short-listed for or winning prestigious literary awards. Aamer Hussain, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Mohammad Hanif and Daniyal Mueenuddin are some of the authors whose works have variably been either short-listed or become finalists for prestigious prizes like the Booker Prize, Pulitzer Prize, Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, or have been honoured with the Guardian First Book Award (Hanif), Betty Trask Awards (Hamid) and Orange Prize for Fiction (Shamsie). Nonetheless, while writers from Pakistan seem to have enjoyed international attention over the last decade, the bulk of the nation’s literary output still remains critically

unacknowledged. The works that have been explored in relative detail are Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988), and Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989), along with the poetical works of Alamgir Hashmi, Daud Kamal, Taufiq Raffat and Zulfiqar Ghose. Apart from this handful of works/writers, the discussion and references to Pakistani English Literature mostly occur in the form of an annual bibliographies (published mostly in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*), and/or occasional review articles in journals or columns in literary supplements. Among those authors writing in English, the largest number airwomen writers, who are using this linguistic medium to conduct meaningful negotiations on a number of social, religious, political and historical issues concerning the lives of Pakistani women, in the preferred literary genre of fiction writing, whether novels or short-stories.

English writers from Pakistan are inheritors of a long and rich multilingual literary tradition dating back as far as the nineteenth century. Ahmed Ali and Shahid Suhrawady started writing just before partition in the 1940s and are often included in anthologies as pioneers in fiction and poetry respectively. In the post-independence period, the initial concerns of Pakistani fiction have been to explore and articulate a sense of a unified national identity, distinguishing itself from a colonial image and the Indian identity of its neighbours. During the 1950s the bulk of Pakistani literature produced in English was characterised by a desire to fulfil a larger, social and nationalist purpose instead of merely providing its readers aesthetic pleasure. The role prescribed for the English writer was to use his/her literary writings to project and propagate an official, nationalist image of Pakistan for the indigenous as well as the foreigner reader, who was to be especially enlightened about the values, norms, social customs and history of the newly independent Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Rehman 56-57).

In this early post-independence period, the only female voice in Pakistani English literature was Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah, who published a collection of short stories titled *The Young Bride and Other Stories* (1958). This collection focused on the different types of social pressures endured and confronted by Pakistani women (Shamsie, *Dragonfly* 2). Interestingly, although the nation had suffered from a traumatised, bloody division on a massive scale, the theme of partition and its suffering did not find articulation in the English Literature of that era. On the other hand, partition and its accompanying communal bloodshed had been boldly taken up by several

indigenous writers writing in Urdu, who particularly highlighted the victimisation of women during the process.

The late 1970s saw the emergence of a strong feminist voice in Pakistan, in relation to the political and religious upheaval of that age. The military dictatorship of that time tried to impose religious fundamentalism, place censorship on the then-popular socialist discourse and do away with the English language by replacing it with Urdu, a marker of nationalist identity. The so-called Islamisation of the State meant strict laws for women and curtailment of their independence and mobility in the name of religion. However, ironically, this resulted in the surfacing of a strong progressive, feminist consciousness that fought hard against military rule. This mobilisation of Pakistani women left its mark on literature as well.

In 1979 Bapsi Sidhwa self-published her first novel, *The Crow-Eaters*, marking the beginning of the modern era in Pakistani English fiction writing (Shamsie, *Dragonfly* 3). Written in a characteristically humorous and ironic style, it presents an insider's view of the customs, rituals and life-styles of the Parsee community in Pakistan. Her next novels, *The Bride*<sup>9</sup> (1983), *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006), are feminist explorations of the gendered existence of Pakistani women exhibiting a willingness to engage with issues of female sexuality, agency and resistance. Sidhwa's works were the first to achieve international recognition and to establish the tradition of using fiction to raise feminist concerns related to the female body; in particular, she considers its essentialist reduction to the roles of mother and wife in the predominantly (so called) Islamic context of modern-day Pakistan.

Since Sidhwa, a large number of women from Pakistan have taken up fiction as space to explore what it means to be a woman: that is, how the subjectivities and experiences of women living in Pakistan are influenced, shaped and given meaning through multiple negotiations with religious, ethnic, communal, regional, economic and

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9. The *Bride* was published in India as *The Pakistani Bride*, while *Ice-Candy Man* was published as *Cracking India* in the West. Apparently, the publishers in India wanted to make clear for its readers that the novel was about a Pakistani bride rather than an Indian one. Similarly, the publishers decided to change *Ice-Candy Man* to *Cracking India* because it was thought the readers might find the title misleading or confusing as the ice-candy man referred to in the novel is the name of a vendor, indigenous to South Asia, who sells golla ganda or "balls of ice" covered with sugary syrup on the streets. The vendor and his wares are particularly popular with kids. Besides, *Cracking India* with its political implications sounded catchier.

linguistic forces. These women writers have succeeded in politicising the category of woman, refusing to give it a singular meaning, and portraying it as an inscriptive surface shaped by competing imperial/nationalist, religious/secular, and fundamentalist/modernist discourses. However, some of the criticism claims that women writers in Pakistan very rarely touch upon the themes of sexuality, sexual differences, gender conflict, and identity politics. Rather, they turn to Nature, home, family, children, and parents, instead of voicing their anguish, anxiety, anger or frustration over their relationship with men; fiascos in marriage, love and sexuality; and the suppression of identity in this patriarchal culture. This criticism may be valid for the fiction produced in popular Urdu magazines spewing stories of romance and marriage. However, it cannot be justified in relation to English fiction. Qaisra Sehzai's *Holy Woman* questions the incarceration of women through marriages to Quran; Feryal Ghour's *Scent of Wet Earth in August* takes up the issue of prostitution, whereas Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* is a rich tale exploring the changing life of urban middle-class Pakistani women. It has to be admitted, though, that some of the Urdu progressive writers have been more open and forthcoming on issues related to sexuality than have English writers. For instance, we fail to find an English parallel to Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* or 'The Quilt', which takes up lesbianism.

This research project is a detailed analysis of the selected literary works of Bapsi Sidhwa as my argument is that her works are symptomatic of the feminist consciousness exhibited and developed in subsequent Pakistani fiction. Sidhwa's works highlight the role of various institutions and practices at work in the patriarchal society of Pakistan that objectify and engender the bodies of Pakistani women in ways that are advantageous for men. Her novels show that by absorbing dominant, patriarchal, ideological structures, women endure and suffer male discrimination and oppression as a natural(ised) course of action. In *Discipline and Punishment* (1978) Foucault argues that instead of using violent and coercive means to control individuals, modern societies rely on systematic self-surveillance and correction. This is achieved through the organisation of institutions and practices, and categories of knowledge to produce what he calls "docile bodies." Taking my cue from Foucault, and owing much to the Western feminist tradition discussed above, my analysis focuses on the study of the discourses and institutions that coerce women into docile bodies within South Asian patriarchy. The two novels selected for analysis in this thesis highlight the role of two South Asian institutions that exercise control over the female body to produce patriarchally

complacent female subjectivities: culture and religion. I critically examine each institution in separate chapters in a one novel-one institution design. Thus, I have examined the role of culture in *The Bride*, while in *Water* the role of religion is analysed in the objectification and subjugation of South Asian female bodies. To mark the contours of Sidhwa's feminist consciousness, the constructions of the Pakistani female body are (or will be) examined in detail in the subsequent chapters of my thesis. Each chapter begins with a brief contextualisation of the literary work under discussion. This brief contextualisation is followed by references to the relevant theoretical constructs, interwoven with critical arguments to foreground the gendered construction of the bodies of women as unveiled by Sidhwa in her novels. The focus of the discussion in each chapter is on how Sidhwa exposes the marginalisation and victimisation of women within patriarchy and how her female characters manage to stage resistance and claim agency for themselves.

*The Bride* and *Water* are novels about South Asian societies characterised by a mind/body divide similar to the one that existed in the classical Western Cartesian philosophy. Marked by a distinct and dominant reverence of religion in everyday life, these societies exhibit a clear inclination to privilege transcendence over imminence, the spiritual world over the material, rationality over corporeality, and consequently, men over women. *The Bride* is a story about women and marriage written against the backdrop of the relatively newly independent Islamic Republic of Pakistan, *Water*, set in the historical context of a pre-independence Indian society, revolves around the themes of marriage and widowhood. Both novels are linked and dominated by images of women who are primarily conceived in terms of the corporeality and sexuality of their bodies. Sidhwa shows in *The Bride* and *Water* that whether it is the Hindu Brahmin patriarchal society of pre-independence India or the Islamic androcentric social setup- of post-independence Pakistan, both societies consistently objectify and essentialise a woman's body in terms of its physiological reproductive function. They use it as an excuse to reductively position a woman in society in the role of a wife and/or mother. The characters of Zaitoon, Carol and Shehnaz in *The Bride* and those of Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala in *Water* illustrate that in the prevalent patriarchal cultural norms and customs of Pakistani society and the dominant socio-religious doctrines of India, a woman fails to attain the legitimacy of an independent self or an individual being like that of a man. She is always the other, the derivative, the marginal,

the subliminal, defined in terms of a lack which exists in the natural order of things to procreate and immortalise the name of men. A woman in control of her own body, without any male supervision, is a source of panic and anxiety in South Asian societies. Consequently, the institutions of marriage and widowhood in these societies have been designed in a way that gives men complete and unquestionable control over the bodies and particularly the sexuality of women. Sidhwa's fiction also unveils the fact that the system of patriarchal oppression is kept in place by women themselves, who act as the accomplice of men due to the internalisation of patriarchal ideologies.

Sidhwa avoids the orientalist trap of depicting women in her novels as merely passive victims of male oppression, by highlighting the tactics used by these women to negotiate agency. The struggle of these women to break free from patriarchal hold may not always be successful, as is the case with Kalyani, but they are shown to be involved in a process of questioning and resisting the socio-religious factors that attempt to manipulate and control their lives. Sidhwa's novels may not reflect any revolutionary ideas about feminist revolt but they are, nevertheless, important in the literary tradition of Pakistan because they present an insider's view of the experiences, subjectivities and bodies of women. If nothing else, Sidhwa's novels give name and recognition to the victimisation, manipulation and marginalisation of women. Their contribution to the construction of a Pakistani feminist consciousness may only, if not unimportantly, be the (literary) ability to put a name to the face of the abuser, which constitutes the first step towards social change.

## Chapter 2

Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. What was at stake was not women but tradition. Thus it is no wonder that even reading against the grain of a discourse ostensibly about women, one learns so little about them . . . neither subject, nor object, but ground—such is the status of women in the discourse on *sati*. (Lata Mani *Contentious Traditions*)

### 2.1 Sidhwa, Mehta and *Water*

The body of the Brahmin Indian woman appearing in *Water* bears a strong resemblance to the body of the Indian woman mentioned in Lata Mani's discussion on *Sati*<sup>10</sup>. Like the body of the woman committing *sati*, the Brahmin Indian woman in *Water* appears as a body which, inscribed with religious and cultural significations, has been historically a ground of zealous debates between the religious and the secular, colonial and the nationalist, orthodox and the liberal, patriarchal and feminist forces. Set in pre-independence India, *Water* is Sidhwa's latest foray into feminist fiction. It is a novel about women and marriage and women and widowhood, with the male desire of controlling female sexuality forming a common thread that joins the two. Like most of the works of South Asian women writers, *Water* is a novel about women's familial and communal roles. However, unlike the historically pre-dominant male literature on the subject, it does not present a view from the centre. Rather, it is a feminist exploration of Indian Brahmin womanhood, offering a view from the margins that unsettles the patriarchal, predominantly religious, metanarratives about the bodies and sexualities of the Indian Brahmin woman in general, and that of the Brahmin widow in particular.

Sidhwa's novel is based on the script of Deepa Mehta's movie with the same title. Mehta, a Canadian filmmaker of Indian origins, is well known for her bold feminist film projects that explore the myriad facets of the lives of Indian women as they are shaped by the intersecting forces of religion, caste, nationalism and normative

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10. Sati is the name given to an Indian widow who self-immolates on the funeral pyre of her husband.

sexuality. The strife between a Hindu patriarchy, which tries to objectify and control women's bodies through religious and nationalist discourses, and contentious Indian women trying to resist this dominance, forms the characteristic feature of Mehta's works. Refraining from portraying her female protagonists as mere victims, her creative projects showcase the complex dynamics of socio-religious forces which come into play when these women try to negotiate agency for themselves within a society bifurcated by caste, creed, colour, and economy. In each movie, included in her elemental trilogy, a key social institution/force forms the focal point of her feminist explorations as she unmasks the role that its rigidly male-centred structure plays in the oppression of Indian women. In *Fire* (1996) she takes up the issue of female desire and sexuality, presenting lesbianism as an alternative to normative heterosexuality. *Earth* (1998), based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Ice-Candy Man*, examines the politics of nationalism during the 1947 Partition of the Indian sub-continent. It highlights how the nationalist discourse, with its masculine undertone on both sides, transformed the bodies of women into battlefields on which communal, religious, and political battles were fought and victories were inscribed. *Water* (2005), the last instalment in her trilogy, challenges orthodox Hindu religious teachings (derived mainly from the Dharmashastras<sup>11</sup>) that render women, particularly the Brahmin widow, vulnerable to destitution, sexual exploitation and social marginalisation.

In 1999, Mehta started filming *Water* in Varanasi, one of the sacred cities in the district of Banaras in northern India. The narrative was set in a pre-independence Varanasi in 1938, a time when an anti-colonial, nationalist Indian political movement was on the rise and Gandhi was establishing himself as a strong political and social reformist figure whose philosophy looked particularly promising for the under-privileged, marginalised sections of Hindu society (like the Varanasi widows). However, soon after Mehta began shooting *Water*, the right-wing fundamentalist religious organisations, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the VHU (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and the KSRSS (Kashi Sanskrit Raksha Sangharsh), also known as Sang Parivaar, all started violent protests against the movie. The film sets were attacked and destroyed in late January 1999, death threats were issued, Mehta's effigies were burnt and suicide attempts along with hunger strikes were staged by seasoned political workers to halt film production (Courtney 2; Yuen-Carrucan). Mehta was labelled "a

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11. Hindu scripture

cultural sell-out and a western spy” while the film was declared to be “an organised plot by the Christian church against Hinduism” (Philips and Alahakon par. 3). The violence was hailed as the “regeneration of the Hindu” (ibid par.12) who had unmasked “the conspiracy by the votaries of Western culture to tarnish the image of widowhood in India” (ibid). Mehta and her film about Indian widows became a battleground for religious fundamentalist groups to stage their political war in the name of nationalism and religion. While Mehta’s body was reduced to a political symbol, the widow’s body was eulogised as the noble preserver of tradition, her destitution was sanctified as a mark of spiritual strength, and thus the issue of her marginalisation, which Mehta wanted to highlight, was lost in the rhetoric of nationalism and religious zealotry.

Eventually Mehta was forced to abandon filming her project in India. A few years later, undeterred, she began shooting *Water* again, this time in Sri Lanka in 2005. Before releasing the film, she approached Sidhwa to turn her movie into a novel, which was published in 2006, winning international acclaim for both Mehta and Sidhwa. Both the movie and the novel explore how religious discourse is used by Brahmin patriarchy to turn women into examples of Foucault’s docile, complacent and subservient bodies, whose sexuality is controlled and, in the case of the widow, exploited by using the notions of *pativrata*, *dharma*, *karma* and shame.

The focus of my analysis in this chapter is, then, the use of Hindu orthodox religious discourse to control and inscribe the bodies of Indian Brahmin women in marriage and in widowhood, as depicted by Sidhwa in *Water*. In the following sections I begin by first briefly establishing the relevance and significance of *Water*’s subject matter, then by offering a detailed discussion of the construction of Indian (Brahmin) womanhood in Hindu religious and mythological resources. This topic is covered in detail as it forms the ideological backdrop of the novel. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a critical analysis of the novel.

Before proceeding further, one key fact must be emphasised and made clear. The discussion of Indian womanhood presented below is by no means exhaustive and it must be kept in mind that there is no such thing as *the Hindu woman*. Hindu woman or Indian woman is not an essentialist or a monolithic epistemological category, rather, it is a complex construct that is shaped, influenced and intersected by the forces of religion, caste, economy, education, language and even geography. In the context of the

novel, I will be mainly concerned with the construction of Brahmin Hindu women, within a specific temporal and spatial context, that is, Varanasi in the 1930s. As the discussion in the following section will point out, that, even if things have changed in India since the 1930s, the destitution, marginalisation and exploitation faced by many widows, even today, in the holy cities like Varanasi, requires a strong feminist intervention.

Sidhwa builds her novel around the character of Chuyia, a six-year-old Brahmin child bride, who is abandoned, by her family and in-laws in an *ashram* in Varanasi after the death of her husband when she was aged eight. Through the story of Chuyia, Sidhwa captures the descent of a Hindu Brahmin female into widowhood, highlighting the rituals involved and the symbolic construction of widows as shamed bodies. Mehta's movie, centred on the Kalyani-Narayan love affair, seems to be more concerned with capturing the plight of Brahmin widows and to show the futility of any resistance unless the relevance of orthodox socio-religious codes is questioned, particularly by women. On the other hand, Sidhwa expands the canvas of her novel to show how Hindu high-caste patriarchy has used religion as a tool to institutionalise the twin systems of marriage and widowhood to their advantage. She proposes that both systems are built in such a way that men are allowed to exert control over women's bodies in terms of their movement, reproductive functions and sexuality. Furthermore, by detailing the stories of exploitation of other widows apart from Chuyia, Sidhwa builds a multivocal narrative that unmasks the complexities of an unforgiving patriarchal social system at work in Hindu culture. The patriarchal, predominantly religious, structure of Hindu society primarily makes women vulnerable by gendering them in the roles of mothers and wives. Their roles as procreators and nurturers helps to confine women to the private world inside the house and their consequent dependence on men for economic support and social security makes them susceptible to their exploitation. Moreover, the reductive and essentialist approach inversely turns the position of any woman who is childless and/or is widowed into an anomaly and a social outcast. The patriarchal structure is kept in place by the support of religious dogmas and traditions which, by endorsing the doctrine of biological essentialism, provide ground to justify the exploitation of women, making them, in Ketu H. Katrak's words, "victims of their own femaleness" (9).

In spite of the fact that the story of *Water* dates back to 1938, the issue at the core of Sidhwa's novel, concerning the exploitation of Brahmin women due to the religious precepts related to marriage, is still highly relevant in the literary, cultural and socio-economic context of today's India. Thematically speaking, the majority of works by Indian women writers are concerned with the familial and communal positioning of women in Indian culture. Their works register the concern that in spite of various feminist movements at work in India today, the identity of Indian women is still not constructed as autonomous subjects; rather, their *self* is identified in terms of others, particularly their male kin. These women authors have questioned and problematised the cultural logic that makes Indian womanhood synonymous with motherhood in popular myth, traditions, rituals, literature and even language, pointing out the underside of this cultural construction. Discussing the portrayal of women in the contemporary writings of South Asian women writers, Lisa Lau Ee-Jia argues that most of these writers revolt against the ideological positioning of women as the *other* in the South Asian socio-religious discourses:

South Asian women of various regions, cultures, and religions have been portrayed in their literature as being regarded, since time immemorial, as vessels of men, as part of their families, as producers of heirs and descendents to varying degrees . . . The discrimination between men and women in India and rest of South Asia is generally marked, definite, and largely non-negotiable. [In] the Hindu hierarchy of women . . . biology is a woman's destiny and . . . [she is positioned] as "the metaphysical nothingness of woman" who is always a low-caste. (370)

While motherhood and wifhood are eulogised as ideal roles for women in Indian culture, women at the opposite end of this spectrum continue to suffer, in economic as well as cultural terms. Prevalent and popular beliefs see ". . . wifhood is an imperative for women, widowhood and spinsterhood being the most inauspicious and dreaded of fates" (ibid). Traditionally, a widow, depending on her caste, received a variety of treatments, some physical like *Sati* (the traditional, religious and much esteemed self immolation of the wife after her husband's death), tonsure (shaving of the head), and others largely social, like the complete abandonment in *ashrams* with no means to sustain themselves and the prohibition to remarry. And even though Mehta's movie was

accused of tarnishing the image of the Indian widows, the truth remains that even today widows, especially Brahmin widows, live in extreme destitution and are subjected to social marginalization and frequent sexual abuse: “Today, widows in Indian communities are not subjected to the kind of torturous, humiliating violent treatment (like *Sati*, shaving of head) that was their fate a hundred years back, yet widowhood is still largely and generally considered inauspicious and shameful” (Major lii).

In 1992, Deepali Bhan conducted a study for the National Commission for Women and reported that in spite of the various attempts of governmental organisations and several NGOs to elevate the conditions of widows. Still the widows in India, particularly in its Holy cities like Vrindavan, continue to live in destitution, and many of them are forced into the profession of prostitution to survive: “. . . flesh trade flourishes in Vrindavan and Mathura in the full knowledge of the police, administration, holy men and politicians” (Bhanot qtd. in Hutokshi par. 11). A national census carried out by the Indian government, as early as 1991, reported the presence of 33 million widows all over India. This amounted to 8% of the total female population and 50% of the female population over the age of 50. These figures rate India among the highest countries in terms of widowhood percentage (Hutokshi par.15). Since then, various studies and reports, some of which were conducted as recently as 2007, show the number of widows in India to have ranged from 40 million to 30 million in the last decade. (For further details see, Chen; Sogani; McGrivering; Saltzman; Major).

The incident of Roop Kanwar’s willing performance of *Sati* in 1987 before a congregation of villagers, the acquittal of people involved in the incident and the public eulogizing of Roop Knawar as *Sati-Mata* or the “pure mother” afterwards, show that though extreme practices like *Sati* or tonsure may not be common today, the religious and social ideologies working behind widowhood are to varying degrees still in place in India. The fact that the incident took place in a prosperous and highly literate village like Deorala, Rajasthan (at the time of this incident the literacy rate was reported to be about 70%) shows how deep-rooted these ideologies are and how powerfully religious ideologies impact the lives of women in India. Similarly, the protest staged by the religious political parties against Mehta’s filming of *Water* in India shows that as long as women continue to be construed as symbols of ethnic/national/religious/familial honour or as guardians of tradition, the bodies of these women, irrespective of their

caste, status or nationality, will continue to form the battlegrounds for men to fight their political wars, exact vengeance on their opponents and inscribe victories.

## 2.2 The Religious Tradition

As a religious doctrine, Hinduism refers to the system of beliefs and practices that originated in the Northwest regions of the Indus Valley during the Vedic period more than 1500 years ago (Anderson 1; Rao 2). Unlike Judaism, Christianity or Islam, Hinduism as a religion does not have a single authoritative scripture or book nor was it founded by any single prophet/messenger. This factor, combined with the variegated geographical expanse of the Indian sub-continent (with regions rich in their own histories, traditions, mythologies and deities), and a society stratified on the basis of a detailed caste system result in making the *Indian Hindu Woman* an epistemological category that is essentially diverse.

Claimed by its practitioners to be a holistic religious doctrine that combines the metaphysical with the physical and the spiritual with the social, Hinduism is historically said to draw its spiritual, philosophical and socio-cultural principles from two main sources, the Vedas and the Smritis. The Vedas, literally meaning “books of knowledge”, are considered to be *apaurusheya* (non-human) and form the basis of all Hindu socio-religious philosophy. Consisting of four books, Vedas<sup>12</sup> are believed to be collection of eternal knowledge or divine revelations divulged by the supreme god *Brahma* to *Rishis* or seers (people practicing and possessing the highest levels of spiritual purification). Smritis<sup>13</sup> on the other hand, mean “what is remembered” and belong to the *paurusheya* (man-made) tradition of Hindu religious thought. Existing as a secondary religious resource, they are collections of socio-cultural rules and principles that have been

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12. The Vedas are divided into four books, Rig-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda and Atharva-Veda. Each Veda is then further subdivided into various sections that detail knowledge about various gods and goddesses, along with detailed instructions about various rituals and hymns to be used during their worships.

13. The Smritis, like the Vedas, are made up of four key books, the Dharmashastras, the Itihas (translated as the “Historical Epic”), the Puranas and the six Vedangas. The Dharmashastras are also known as The Laws of Manu, named after the Hindu sage who compiled them together. Both Mahabharata and Ramayana, together known as Itihas, codify a mythical history of Indian subcontinent which, like the Greek and Roman mythological tradition, details the pattern of interactions between gods and humans. More importantly, these stories they provide patterns for the configuration of the social structure of a Hindu society, and create role models for practitioners of Hinduism to follow in their daily lives.

codified by Hindu sages in light of their experiences and knowledge of the world as well as that of the Vedas. From a social and cultural point of view, the Smritis are of great significance as they lay down the guiding principles for the organization, administration and control of the communal, individual and familial life in a Hindu society. Note that while the Vedas are thought to be repositories of eternal, unchangeable knowledge, the Smritis are subject to change and their conceptualisation has been influenced by the geographical and temporal necessities of the period of their creation. In short, the Vedas epitomize the divine, while the Smritis represent the man-made tradition in Hindu religious doctrines (Ayer part 1; Anderson 4; Rao 18-22). Among these religious scriptures, the teachings of the Dharmashastras have been of crucial importance in naturalising patriarchal control of women's sexuality and lives in the name of religion through a negative construction of their bodies: "There are few texts so prolifically quoted and profoundly implicated when it comes to the position of women" (Anderson 9).

### ***2.2.1 Shakti, Prakriti and the Indian Woman: The Mythical Connection***

In *Water* Sidhwa shows that Hindu patriarchy is able to primarily control and exploit Brahmin women by positioning them in the roles of wives and mothers. The gendering of the identity of Hindu women in terms of the reproductive functions of their bodies makes marriage obligatory for women and the religious, predominantly patriarchal, construction of the institution of marriage in turn gives men further power over them. The mythological construction of the feminine principle in Hindu religion as *Shakti* and *Prakriti* provides the religious basis for socially positioning women as mothers and wives.

Indian mythology exhibits a dual model of femininity: one which is benign, life-giving and powerful on the one hand, and materialistic, essentialist and dangerous on the other. When translated in human terms the duality of this mythological model results in ambiguity and conflict about the positioning of women which, in turn, is exploited and synthesised by patriarchy to create a socio-religious ideological structure that is advantageous for men. In one of the myths of creation the feminine form is portrayed as *Shakti* (literally translated as "power")—the feminine face of god, the *Maha-Devi*, the Great Mother, the energy that permeates every creation and is the driving principle behind it. Without *Shakti* there would be no life, no universe. The universe or life arises out of an undistinguishable, invisible and inert substance called

*Brahman*, which is made visible, alive and active through the infusion of *Shakti* in it. This myth of creation constructs the feminine creative principle of *Shakti* as an equal, active though opposite half of the male creative force, the *Brahman*. This results in the creation of a theological model of existence where male and female are not positioned as binary opposites in a hierarchal relationship, but rather one where they coexist as mutually dependent forces of creation, where one is incomplete without the other.

The diametrically opposed other image of femininity found in Hindu mythology is that of *Prakrti* or Nature. She forms the other half of a universal (male) spirit called *Purusa*. *Prakrti* exists as undistinguished matter, which is then marked into different, distinct forms by *Purusa*. Thus, the macrocosm comes into being through the combination of *Purusa* and *Prakrti*, the masculine and the feminine, the structuring force and the raw material, spirit and matter, and in the case of microcosm or human society, culture and nature, man and woman and the corporeal and the spiritual. This construction of femininity is clearly not only hierarchal but it is also essentialist. It situates the masculine principle in the role of subject whereas the feminine force as its other is positioned as an object that is open to its normative influence and control of the masculine principle. This mythical construction of man/woman as subject/object is significant because unlike the myth of creation, this view generates a wide range of bilateral binary associations that place men in a superior position while situating women in a secondary role. This binary opposition of Nature/Culture, feminine/masculine, corporeal/spiritual in Hinduism is similar to the one found in the Western philosophical tradition and entails an almost similar control of women's bodies by men to the one discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

The construction of Nature as feminine in Indian mythology has serious repercussions for Hindu women. It intrinsically binds their bodies with materiality and construes them to be more corporeal in their existence than men. It engenders an entire system of socio-religious thought founded on the principle of biological essentialism that refuses to conceptualise women in any other terms except those of nurturers and procreators. This association of the feminine principle with nature helps patriarchy to naturalise and disguise its reductive construction of the bodies and social positioning of Hindu women within a traditional Hindu society. Once construed as wives and mothers, marriage becomes an unavoidable obligation for women because it allows them to

execute the duties ascribed to their lot by Nature in a morally, religiously and socially acceptable way.

Moreover, the construction of their bodies in predominantly corporeal, biological and materialistic terms results in confining Hindu women to the realm of desires and instincts. Unlike Hindu men, as the bodies of women are more corporeal and less spiritual, their actions are primarily motivated by their passions and desires. And among these desires, there is no innate urge that is as strong and powerful in a woman as sex. In this context, the dual model of femininity, which sees women as both *Shakti* and *Parkti*, creates the image of a power that is unschooled and raw and at the same time lustful and passionate. It thereby symbolically suggests that if the feminine principle or the women are to be left on their own they can prove to be highly destructive and dangerous. Several of the Hindu myths reinforce this image of a feminine destructive power. For example, a famous myth associated with Kali (the Hindu goddess of war) narrates that at the end of a critical war against the evil forces, she lost control and started destroying everything that lay in her path, indiscriminately. She would have destroyed the world if Shiva had not intervened and stopped her bood dance of death. Within this ideological system the construction of the masculine principle as *Purusa*, a structuring and guiding force, consequently makes the task of socialising and controlling the bodies (particularly the sexualities) of women the natural prerogative of men. As men are more spiritual in their existence than women, they are less likely to be tempted by their physical desires and are so more able to perform the function of harnessing the corporeal energies of women to construct a society. In *Water Sidhwa* shows that it is this ideology that results in the stringent control and removal of the Brahmin widow from the mainstream social and public life because being deprived of the controlling male figures in her life (her father and husband) she can easily cause havoc in society by succumbing to her innate, lustful nature.

In Hindu mythical iconography, a goddess/woman in control of her own sexuality/body/*Shakti* possesses equal potential to be a fertile/benevolent force or a destructive/malignant power and her position as either can precariously change at any time. However, once she submits herself to male control, she is consistently portrayed as a nurturing and benign force. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of the goddesses who are most revered or idealised in Hindu mythology (like Sita, Parvati, Sawaitri) are excellent wives or mothers. Similarly, within the huge plethora of gods

and goddesses that makes up the Hindu mythology in general, every (major) god has a consort who, being the incarnation of *Shakti*, constitutes a secondary source of the god's powers. But these consorts only become a positive influence in the lives of their husbands when they have successfully schooled their power/sexuality, *Shakti/Prakriti*, by willingly submitting to their husbands. These consorts, as intensely devoted, chaste, and loyal goddesses, are commonly depicted as keeping their male companion out of harm's way and/or make him spiritually strong by the rigorous performance of various religious rituals like sacrifices, prayers and occasional fasts, thus becoming *Shakti* for their husbands. Sidhwa's novel highlights that in a Brahmin society, under the influence of these mythical constructs, being widowed becomes a social stigma because it signifies a wife's lack of devotion and her failure to use her *Shakti* to protect her husband, thus causing his untimely death. Moreover, her novel shows how the mythical construction of women as *Shakti* and *Prakriti* becomes highly damaging for Hindu women within a Brahmin Hindu society as it reduces them to the roles of mothers and wives and normalises the control of men over their bodies.

### **2.2.2 Dharma, Purity and Marriage**

According to both Vedas and Smritis, the ultimate goal of every individual is to strive for the attainment of spiritual enlightenment. Although the vastly varied practices of Hinduism allow its practitioners to experience life in both terms, the material as well as the spiritual, the ideology of looking at the material world as *Maya*, or an illusion, gives spirituality transcendence over materiality and consequently, men over women. Hindu scriptures outline the ideology of *Purusharthas* or "life-goals" which details the paths that the believers can use to attain enlightenment. According to *Purusharthas*, spiritual salvation can be earned by following the path of knowledge (*Moksha*), the path of action (*Dharma* and *Artha*) or the path of devotion (*Kama*). These paths represent a conflict between the spiritual man, who renounces the world to gain knowledge and the man-in-world, who by the fulfilment of his *dharma* and righteous actions earns a good *karma* that leads him to salvation (Allen 1; Anderson 2). I will discuss the doctrines of *moksha* and *dharma* in detail as they have been most influential in shaping the prevalent ideology about women. These doctrines, with their emphasis on renunciation and purity respectively, end up stereotyping women in terms of the biological functioning of their

bodies and legitimise the patriarchal control of their sexuality in the name of religious obligations<sup>14</sup>.

If spiritual emancipation is the highest purpose for a Hindu, then *moksha* or 'release from materiality', through renunciation, becomes the most aspired goal. Since the Vedic times, asceticism or renunciation has been presented as the most admired and esteemed path for any believer to undertake<sup>15</sup>. For an ascetic, sex becomes the most alluring trap and women, as the source of the gratification of this desire, in turn become an enemy, a hindrance: ". . . since woman was, for man, Nature's normal means for the satisfaction of his sexual impulse, she became synonymous with desire. For such philosophies and ideals, which emphasized celibacy . . . woman became the enemy" (Lal qtd. in Allen 2). Indian mythology is filled with numerous references to the seduction of the ascetic by beautiful nymph-like creatures called *Apsaras*. Casting women in the archetypal position of the seductress, most of the ascetic traditions warn their followers of women's charms in very strict words:

It is she who beguiles us into accepting life through sexual desire and through attachment and affection and all else that she stands for . . . In this miserable, unhappy, uniformly dreadful, hopeless affair called life, she works as an ally to the great enemy. Mar, the god who in Buddhist philosophy personifies both desire and death, so that we choose to stay caught forever in his dreaded noose . . . [She] has kept us chained to this earth, to life, and stopped us from moving either towards divinity or towards non-being. (Allen 12)

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15. The two doctrines of *moksha* and *kama* form the two opposite extreme ends of Purusharthas. The practitioner of the first completely rejects the material world, particularly, in its sensuous aspect, whereas, the believers who follow the path of *kama*, like the *bhakti* and *tantaric* traditions, use sensual fulfilment to achieve salvation. Hindus' in *tantaric* and *bhakti* tradition value women, particularly their sexual vigour, as the ecstasy experienced during the union of male and female is seen as a means to bring them closer to god. However, as they form a marginal group, therefore their estimation of women has not made a major impact on formulating the general public opinion about Hindu womanhood.

16. By completely severing off all of his ties with society, giving up the comforts of the flesh and by renouncing the gratification of his bodily needs the ascetic tries to achieve enlightenment by developing an intuitive knowledge of the Divine.

Furthermore, the ascetic considers the material world to be *Maya* or “an illusion”—a concept reminiscent of Platonic view of existence—that has to be transcended in order to be illuminated. Women, with their ability to menstruate, give birth and lactate, become the human embodiment of the materiality of the world or *Maya* and must be transcended by an ascetic to reach spiritual salvation. This doctrine consequently stereotypes women within a Hindu society as seductresses, temptresses, repositories of lust or the right hand of the devil, relegating them to an inferior and secondary position in comparison to men. Being stereotyped in these roles creates a cultural logic for blaming women if they are sexually abused by men. Sidhwa highlights this exploitation of Hindu women in her novel through the treatment of the Brahmin widow whose forced prostitution is seen by the Brahmin society not as instance of men taking advantage of a helpless woman, but is interpreted as a proof of her lustful nature.

Though highly desirable, the path of renunciation is not recommended for every practitioner. For the man bound to the material and social world (man-in-the-world), enlightenment can be attained by fulfilling his *dharma*. The doctrine of *dharma* (also broadly known as *Varnashrama-dharma*) refers to an elaborate system of duties and rituals (social, religious and familial) assigned to every individual according to the twin *Varna*<sup>16</sup> (caste) and *Ashrama* systems. According to the *Ashrama* system, a man’s life should pass through four phases, each corresponding to a cycle of natural life. The first phase in his life is of a novice (*brahma charya*), succeeded by the phases of the householder (*grahita*), the hermit (*vanaprastha*) and the ascetic (*sanyasa*). As a novice he is supposed to exercise control, preserve his energies (particularly sexual) and then use them to establish and sustain a good household as a married man. During the late middle age he should start preparing himself for the after-life, slowly disengaging himself from worldly affairs, whereas in his old age he should be totally committed to material renunciation, thereby gaining spiritual insight.

Unlike the ascetic, for a man-in-world the body of a woman acquires a relatively positive signification as her body becomes a means or a vessel that can help him in

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17. A conventional Hindu society is hierarchally structured according to an elaborate system of social classes called Vernas (popularly known as “castes”). The Verna system ensures the existence of a harmonious society by assigning a certain occupational role and status to every caste. In the traditional stratification of castes, Brahmins sit at the top of the caste echelon, followed by Kashtriyas, and Vaish, with Shudras at the bottom. The Brahmins, said to have sprung from the mouth of the great god, are the gate-keepers and interpreters of knowledge, particularly that of the scriptures.

successfully fulfilling his worldly duties or *dharma* and thereby attain spiritual salvation. The union of a Hindu man with a woman through marriage allows him to move from the level of a *brahma charya* to the position of a *grahita* or “householder”. For the householder, a devoted, loyal and dutiful wife is a valued possession as she helps him establish a good household and by procuring him sons plays an instrumental role in his advancement to the next level of the hermit. However, a man without a male heir to whom he can delegate his household duties before retiring from the worldly affairs becomes a religious and social failure, who will not be able to attain spiritual salvation. When a wife fails to produce children, or if they are only girls, society as well as the scriptures allow (rather, encourage) the husband to remarry until he gets a male heir and secures his lineage. If that is the case, then the childless/sonless wife usually becomes a target of shame, abuse and violence. The doctrine of *dharma* in this context positions Hindu women positively and particularly as mothers of sons they are usually considered auspicious and gain a certain amount of agency<sup>17</sup>. Bhagya who is the mother of the protagonist in Sidhwa’s novel, is respected by her husband and society because she has provided her husband with not one but two sons, thus helping him fulfil his *dharma*.

But even this positioning of the Hindu woman, with all its positivity, is still problematic because it reinforces her exclusive social role as a wife and a mother. Moreover, a woman’s body is construed more as a vessel or instrument to be used by men for the fulfilment of their purpose: “By the sacred tradition the woman is declared to be the soil, the man is declared to be the seed . . . comparing the seed and the receptacle, the seed is declared to be more important” (Manu qtd. in Wadley, 115-116). This doctrine assigns men the position of the subject while the women as wives take on the role of an object, mostly deprived of an identity as a separate entity possessing agency: “[the fact that as a wife] she was merely the medium through which the husband’s goals were achieved and that she herself had neither personhood nor religious

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18. Drawing a comparison between the Indian woman's status as a wife and mother, Madhu Kishwar has observed that motherhood appears to be more rewarding for an Indian woman because “As a mother she is allowed the right to both nurture and dominate and is supposed to be venerated unconditionally” (25). It must be emphasized that this respect and power is awarded to a woman in the best of scenarios. Mostly, though respected, mothers do not get to have say in major decisions related to their lives. Moreover, this veneration of motherhood has a negative side to it, particularly its impact on childless/sonless wives, as they usually become a target of shame, abuse and violence.

or social goals is evident from denial of children (and through sons to immortality) to her in the event of her husband's death" (Chakravarti, "Gender" 2249).

While the religious scriptures outline four different paths for a Hindu male to gain spiritual salvation, the choice is not the same in the case of women. Hinduism does allow women to become ascetic. However, this path is neither preferred nor glorified. For a woman, like the archetypal goddesses in Hindu mythology, her *dharma* revolves around her husband. An auspicious woman is one who is married and who has produced male heir/s for the continuation of her husband's caste: "A woman justifies her existence only as mother and as a mother of sons. A mother's status is privileged not in sense of special rights but as an attribute without which a woman is useless" (Bagchi 78). Her *dharma* is *pativrata* or *satitva*, that is, "to worship her husband like a god", while completely and unconditionally submitting herself to him, physically as well as sexually. A wife, bound to her husband through eternity, is supposed to fulfil her *dharma* by being loyal, chaste and serviceable to her husband, irrespective his character or personality: "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be worshipped as a god by a faithful wife" (Manu qtd. in Sogani 5).

Thus, according to the ideology of *dharma* in Hindu religion women have been created to play the roles of wives and mothers. Their *dharma* is to completely submit themselves to the authority of their husbands, to remain chaste and loyal to them, to maintain cast purity by fastidiously guarding their sexuality and, most importantly, to help their husbands achieve spiritual salvation by providing them with male heirs. If the doctrine of *Shakti* and *Prakriti* give men control over women's bodies by essentialising them in the roles of wives and mothers through marriage, the defining of women's *dharma* in terms of their total subservience to their husbands ensures their complete domestication after marriage. Reduced to the roles of mothers and wives the submission of a Hindu woman, particularly in sexual terms, to male control becomes eulogised in the name of preserving religious tradition and fulfilling *dharma* in Hindu patriarchy.

### **2.3 Caught between *Dharma* and *Karma*: An Analysis of *Water***

Structurally, Sidhwa has divided *Water* into three sections: the novel starts with an epilogue that introduces the character of Chuyia, a six-year-old Brahmin child

rescuing a small puppy. It is then followed by a long middle section which is further sub-divided into chapters. However, Sidhwa chooses to close the novel without an epilogue. This choice is perhaps symbolic on the part of the writer indicating the unresolved, inconclusive nature of the theme of widowhood discussed in the novel.

Thematically, the story seems to be divided into two sections, in which the first part deals with the institution of marriage, while the second focuses on widowhood. In the first section Sidhwa introduces her readers to the family of her female protagonist, Chuyia. Through the dynamics of the marital relationship of Somnath, Chuyia's father, and Bhagya, her mother, Sidhwa is able to capture the essence of Brahmin objectification of women as wives and mothers. This section closes with a discussion of Chuyia's marriage to Hira Lal which sheds light on the use of the institution of marriage by Brahmin patriarchy to control the sexuality of women and to use their bodies for socio-economic gain. The next section begins with the news of Chuyia's widowhood, followed by a detailed description of the rituals that publicly mark her status as a widow. She is abandoned by her mother-in-law in an *ashram*<sup>18</sup> at Rawalpur where she meets widows of various age groups, some being young like Kalyani, others middle-aged like Shakuntala or very old, as is Bua. The *ashram* is run by a widow named Madhumati who forcefully uses Kalyani for prostitution to cover the expenses of the *ashram* and to satisfy her personal drug addiction. Narayan, a young Brahmin follower of Gandhi, falls in love with Kalyani but his efforts to marry her are thwarted by both his mother and Madhumati. Eventually Kalyani commits suicide before her secret marriage to Narayan because she finds out that his father had been one of her regular customers. Being deprived of her source of income, Madhumati sends a very young Chuyia to one of her clients. Chuyia's rape galvanizes Shakuntla to send Chuyia away from Rawalpur with Narayan. Through the second section, Sidhwa captures the extreme destitution of the Brahmin widows who are sentenced to a life of shame and misery in the name of religion, and uses it to question the logic that necessitates their public humiliation and maltreatment. By exposing the economic benefits achieved by Brahmin men from the marginalisation of widows, Sidhwa casts suspicion over the true motives involved in condemning Brahmin women to celibacy after the death of their husbands.

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19. A hermitage where, in the context of the novel, widows live.

In the novel, marriage and widowhood are presented by Sidhwa as the two institutions that define, structure and constrain the category of Hindu Brahmin Womanhood, like the two opposite sides of the same coin. The body of Hindu Brahmin women, belonging to various age groups and economic strata, forms the central and connecting link between the two sections. It is a body that is loved and loathed, honoured and shamed, desired and desiring, docile and subversive, licentious and pure, guarded and violated, controlled and feared, but most importantly, it is an inscriptive surface used by Brahmin patriarchy to construct an ideal woman which it can control, manipulate and use for its advantage.

### ***2.3.1 Kanyadaan—Marriage as Transaction***

In *Water* Sidhwa depicts the institution of marriage as one of the primary sources used by the Brahmin patriarchy for the control, exploitation and objectification of women's bodies in Hindu culture. The social and religious institution of marriage, in its heterosexual form, constitutes the basic structural and functional unit of a Hindu society and has been historically exploited by men for social and economic advantage. Sidhwa brings out the instrumental role played by the institution of marriage in objectifying and exploiting Brahmin women through the marriage of six-year-old Chuyia with Hira Lal, a Brahmin man in his forties.

In Hindu culture, the marriage of a daughter is termed *kanyadaan*, a word which symbolically discloses the underlying socio-cultural construction of a woman's body through its etymological structure. The Hindi word *kanyadaan* is made of two words: *kanya*, which means "a virginal young girl" and *daan*, which means "to give as gift", thus, the literal meaning of *kanyadaan* is "the gifting of a virginal daughter". This word aptly describes the way women are married in not only Hindu, but also in most of the South Asian patriarchal societies, even today. Traditionally, in the Indian (South Asian) culture marriages are decided between the two (patriarchal heads of) families. Rather than being a union of two individuals, they are the beginning of complex social and economical kinship relations between two families/castes. In these marriages, popularly known also as "arranged marriages," the consent or the desires of the marrying girl hold little or no importance. Instead, the considerations of caste, along with the social, religious and economic benefits that could be obtained by the two families become the deciding factor.

In other words, within Brahminical patriarchy, *kanyadaan* offers an excellent legitimate opportunity for the families of the bride and the bridegroom to socially, religiously, and/or economically advance in society. Sidhwa writes about the popular belief in Hindu culture according to which, once a girl/woman is married, her natal family is expected to relinquish their rights over her because being a wife she goes into the proprietorship of her husband: “Just as the giver can no longer lay claim to an object that has once been donated, the parents of a traditional Hindu bride have no rights over their daughter once she has been gifted to the bridegroom” (*Water* 21). Thus it is not surprising to know that in India a girl is commonly referred to as *paraya dhan* or “wealth that belongs to someone else” in Hindi language. As religion decrees that her primary role is to be a wife, from birth she is seen as a temporary guest in her natal house: “Her parents are considered caretakers whose main responsibility is to deliver a chaste daughter, along with a sizable dowry, to her husband's family” (Anderson and Moore sec. sex). In the majority of areas in South Asia, the parents of the bride are expected to pay a handsome dowry to the bridegroom’s family as a kind of bridal gift. If the parents are unable to arrange a dowry, particularly a sizable one, for their daughter/s it usually means that their daughter/s will never get married and, carrying the stigma of a spinster, will become an object of social disfavour and financial distress (Anwary 433). The Director of the Community Service guild in Madras (one of India’s large cities) reported that for most of the Indian families: “Bringing up a girl is like watering a neighbour's plant. From birth to death, the expenditure is there. The dowry often wipes out a family's life savings but is necessary to arrange a proper marriage and maintain the honour of the bride's family” (Anderson and Moore sec. sex).

Thus, the marriages taking place in Indian society reduce the body of the woman to an object that is sold by the bride’s family to the parents of the groom. In *Water*, Madhumati recalls that when she was married, her father, a rich Brahmin landlord, sent her off with a huge dowry as was socially expected of him: “When the family forced him to get me married, he gave me a dowry like I was a king’s daughter!” (*Water* 69). Sidhwa shows in her novel that the inability of the bride’s family to wed their daughter because of a lack of dowry is often exploited by the rich and upper caste Hindus to obtain very young, fertile and often virginal wives. Due to the importance awarded to the fertility of a Hindu woman by religion and society, the body of a fertile virgin itself becomes a huge dowry for aged men. While, on the other

hand, the parents of the bride's family are often more than happy to comply because in this way they not only get rid of a financial burden but they also develop kinship with a rich family, something that often brings its own social and economic benefits. This is what happens in Chuyia's case.

Chuyia's father Somnath, who is a Brahmin priest in the village, accepts the proposal of Hira Lal's mother for his daughter because being related to a resourceful, rich family like them will mean an increase in his social standing and, consequently, the demand for his services will grow and this will bring his family more money. This is precisely what happens after the marriage of Chuyia to Hira Lal:

As the demand for husband's services grew, Bhagya expended a small fortune on joss stick and sandalwood and spent more time praying to the pantheon of gods and goddesses. . . . [T]wice a day, drenched in gratitude, she prostrated herself before the Goddess Lakshmi. . . . 'Once the goddess decides to give, she is not stingy', Somnath declared between mouthfuls of a fiery fish curry mixed with rice. (22)

From the start Chuyia's marriage is dictated by economic and social considerations. When Bhagya objects to the irrational match made by her husband, between their pre-pubescent daughter and a mature, widowed man, she is placated by being reminded that they will not have to spend money on a dowry or on the arrangement of a wedding reception: "They don't want a dowry; they will pay for the wedding" (7). Any misgivings that Bhagya had about the age of Hira Lal were resolved on Chuyia's wedding day when she realised that this relation would bring prosperity for her family, particularly the sons:

Bhagya thought of her sons and wondered, would she be able to give them the quantity of milk and fat and fish that had nourished Hira Lal's trim body? And even as she mutely appealed to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, to bless her household, her misgivings concerning her daughter's betrothed quieted. The goddess had favoured her, but she had been too thick-headed to recognize it; it was plain to see that the connection with Hira Lal's family would benefit her household. (20-21)

Placed bedside her husband, decked in jewels and a colourful sari, Chuyia is described by the image of “a diminutive doll” (21) which very aptly sums up her position as an object in the hands of first her father and later her in-laws. The fate which befalls Chuyia is not shown to be unique to her. Rather the stories of the marriages of other widows, relayed later, indicate a similar objectification of women’s bodies. Other women, like Kalyani and Bua had also been sold or married off by their fathers at ages when they were too young to remember or understand the signification of what was happening to them. As they share later on:

Kalyani’s story was much like her [Chuyia’s] own. Kalyani’s family was very poor and had no landholdings. She had two brothers and two sisters, all older than she. Her mother had always been weak, and the five pregnancies had taken a toll on her health. . . . With three daughters on his hands, her father had been anxious to marry them off. Word of Kalyani’s beauty had spread, and she was married off to the highest bidder, a man of sixty, when she was six. (133)

Given the construction and practice of *kanyadaan* which objectifies the bodies of women and uses them as objects in barter trade, it becomes highly ironic when the readers are told that men like the fathers of Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala or Madumati claim: “Of all the ceremonial gifts, the *kanyadaan*, or bride-gift, is considered to be the holiest” ( 21). This contrast between the financial underpinnings of *kanyadaan* and its social status as a sacred religious duty or institution highlights how the bodies of women are traditionally exploited in the name of social or religious tradition.

### ***2.3.2 Constructing Hindu Womanhood***

The definitions of womanhood and the patterns of socialisation of women depicted in *Water* display a strong affinity with the way Western patriarchy has historically constructed women as the *Other* and gendered their bodies in terms of biological essentialism. Women in the Indian Brahminical world of *Water* are not shown to possess an individual identity as a female. Rather, from her childhood the meanings of a woman’s being or self are depicted to be codified in relation to her male kin; she is a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother but never an individual in her own right: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is

the other” (De Beauvoir 51). De Beauvoir’s words ring true for the women in Sidhwa’s novel. Discriminatory treatment becomes the fate of a girl with her birth; she is treated as a second class citizen, while her brothers, irrespective of their virtue, are preferred over her. Sidhwa shows that, interestingly, it is not only the fathers or the male members of the family who treat a female child differently; women as mothers are more than often guilty of acting as agents of patriarchy and of dealing with daughters and sons discriminately. In *Water* the news of Chuyia’s wedding makes Bhagya realise that she had always been proud of being the mother of two sons, showering her love and attention on them, while her daughter has been continuously neglected:

Bhagya was not given to looking at her daughter [Chuyia] so closely. She often gazed upon her sons as they slept. She covertly observed them when they were absorbed in school work or having the extra portion of food she had saved for them, and then her heart brimmed over with love and the special pride that was her due as the mother of sons. (9)

Seen in the context of the Indian social set-up Bhagya’s behaviour is not out of character or atypical; she is behaving like most Indian mothers act regarding their sons. Indian society, in fact the South Asian cultures in general, is characterised by a marked and undisguised preference for male children. A female child’s fight for survival begins even before her birth because of the commonplace practice of infanticide. Anderson and Moore report that in India, “In urban areas, easier access to modern medical technology enables women to act before birth. Through amniocentesis, women can learn the sex of a fetus and undergo sex-selective abortions. At one clinic in Bombay, of 8,000 abortions performed after amniocentesis, 7,999 were of female fetuses, according to a recent report by the Indian government” (sec. sex).

In a patrilineal cultural set-up where the male child inherits the property and/or wealth of the father, carries on the family name and holds authoritative position as a son, husband or father, female children are destined to discrimination and marginalisation. Even the Indian government officially recognises the secondary treatment meted out to the female children all over India: “In a culture that idolizes sons and dreads the birth of a daughter, to be born female comes perilously close to being born less than human” (Anderson and Moore para. 6). Having survived birth, female children are seen as a burden due to the dowry practices and they typically suffer from

malnutrition, lack of medical treatment and are commonly denied access to secular education (Anwary 433; Anderson and Moore).

Though Sidhwa's main focus is on the discrimination and exploitation of women through marriage and widowhood, she does briefly throw light on the negligence that female children like Chuyia suffer in India. Sidhwa points out that as Chuyia is a female, giving her a worldly/secular education is not seen as an appropriate or valuable investment by her family; she is expected to master the arts of domesticity required to successfully run a household. Thus, Chuyia helps her mother in house chores while her brothers are sent off to school. Such differential treatment, where the best food and resources become the lot of male children, is not limited to one caste, economic strata or time in the Indian culture. Even in today's India such discrimination is very common, across the different social strata:

There is no gainsaying the fact that the typical Indian girl-child . . . has to learn quite early on that she is a second-class citizen even in her mother's home. If she has brothers, she has to play second fiddle to them. . . . Her breaking-in is all the more rigorous if she happens to belong to an economically deprived class, for even in the best of worlds, the girl-child's needs are generally regarded as dispensable. (Nabar 60)

From early childhood a woman is trained to defer to the authority of men, to value their lives over her own, as women are deemed weak in body, judgment and soul: "Oh, sacred pond; oh holy flower! / I worship you beneath the sky/ A girl's purity is my dower /My brothers live and best am I" (*Water* 9). This rhyme, which Chuyia is taught by her mother to sing, honours the two authoritative, sustaining figures in her life, the metaphysical gods and their human incarnations, her brothers. She is valuable not in her own right, but because she has not one but two brothers. The pride associated with Chuyia's brothers and the differential treatment given to them looks quite ironic as readers are clearly made aware that Chuyia is physically more robust, capable and helpful than her brothers. The secondary positioning of daughters becomes doubly ironic when we realise that it is daughters like Chuyia whose bodies are often used to secure material benefit for her natal family. Sidhwa's novel shows that having survived a difficult childhood, women in India have to then live their lives bearing, what John Ward Anderson and Molly Moore, in their website article, call "the burden of

womanhood". Their bodies, construed under the influence of religious precepts, are projected as repositories of shame as culture turns their physiological structures into proof of their weaker and even demonic nature. The Hindu religious tradition, dominated by Brahmin men as the gatekeepers of knowledge, turns the bodies of women into their own worst nightmare.

According to Hindu mythology, Nature or matter goes through three phases which, when translated into human terms, exhibit themselves as three fundamental qualities, characteristics or *gunas* of a person's nature. In Hinduism these *gunas* are *rajas* (passion), *sattav* (goodness/spirituality) and *tamas* (ignorance). *Rajas* represent the ability to create, which is sustained by *sattav* and is destroyed by *tamas*. These qualities are hierarchal in nature, with *sattav* at top, followed by *rajas* and *tamas*. The bodies of men and women, being created out of matter, in principle possess an equal capacity to be dominated by any of these *gunas* but interestingly as women menstruate, and through it their bodies are continuously engaged in cycles of (potential) birth and death, *rajas* and *tamas* become their defining traits, while men are dominated by *sattav* or spirituality:

Everyone has a natural preponderance of one of the three *gunas*, with *Sattva*, the pure or spiritual principle, dominant in men and either *rajas* the creative or *tamas* the destructive, in women. It is because women give birth to children and menstruate that they are less likely than men to have a preponderance of *sattva* *guna* and hence less likely to achieve the goal of renunciation for attainment of highest spiritual enlightenment.  
(Allen 2)

This doctrine shows that breaking free of the material bounds of existence to reach enlightenment, illumination or even spiritual salvation is possible for men because of the dominance of *sattav* *guna* but not for women. Menstruation, lactation and birth not only keep them chained to the inferior, illusionary and impure physical world, but also makes their existence more corporeal in comparison. This division of men as spirit and women as body/matter is further reinforced by the construction of *Purusa* as masculine and *Prakrti* as feminine principle in Hindu mythology. This doctrine makes it natural and logical to see women being dominated or dictated by the desires of their flesh, while a lack of spiritual strength makes it highly unlikely for them to defend

themselves on their own against their inherently lustful and passionate nature. Consequently, they cannot be left alone and are in need of constant external supervision and surveillance, not only for their own betterment but also to prevent them from damaging and destroying the society in general. As men are naturally dominated by *sattav guna*, therefore, it is their duty to act as the guardians, protectors and law-givers for women.

Sidhwa uses the character of Somnath in *Water* to highlight this ideological positioning of the bodies of women as corporeal, weak and demonic. She shows that Brahmin patriarchy has been exploiting this construction to rationalise and justify its control over the bodies of Hindu women in general and those of Brahmin women in particular. When Bhagya tries to resist her husband's decision to marry Chuyia at the tender age of six, Somnath is quick to remind her that it is their moral, religious and social duty to wed their daughter as soon as possible. He tells her that they must not show any slackness in marrying their daughter, she may be a child now but with the start of menstruation, her active sexuality may endanger their family honour: "A girl carried within her the seeds of dishonor, and the burden of responsibility was to be borne by her parents until she was married" (*Water* 9).

To add conviction to his admonishment Somnath tells his wife not to forget that Hindu religious traditions state that a woman's body is host to a constant conflict between nature and culture; it is constantly torn by a fight between her fervent emotions (particularly sexual) and her religious/moral obligation to control them: "A woman's body is a site for conflict between a demonic *stri-svavahava*, which is her lustful aspect, and her *stri-dharma*, which is her womanly duty" (8). Sidhwa writes that while making this statement Somnath closes his eyes and the ease with which the words come out of his mouth indicates that in all likelihood he often quoted these words and the reverence with which he quotes them seems to suggest that they were taken from a holy scripture. The findings of Chakravarti's work ("Conceptualizing") on the gendering of Hindu women indicate that Somnath is not individualistic in his thinking, rather his thoughts are representative of widely held cultural notions about the bodies of women in the Hindu society. She writes that expressions like "there is no greater delight and no more destructive urge for a woman than sex"(2253) populate indigenous languages in India

and it is commonly believed that: “Women inherit ‘Svabhava’<sup>19</sup> from their mothers while from their father they inherit their stridharma, their duties as women and their ordained functions as wives. Thus a woman’s biological identity is derived from the mother and her socially constructed identity is derived from the father” (ibid). Like Somnath, the Indian culture in general sees the bodies of women to be in state of conflict and ascribes men, as fathers/husbands and even sons, the duty to school their innate dispositions. Like the goddesses in mythical stories, women cannot be trusted with their own *Shakti*, therefore, they must be subjected to the strict control and surveillance of their male kin throughout their lives. According to Laws of Manu: “Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (Anderson 10).

Somnath does not give any significant value to Bhagya’s protest that their daughter is too young and takes her objection as a proof of the truth as well as the validity of the Hindu Holy Scriptures which indicate that women’s actions are motivated by their emotions and not by rational thinking. Bhagya’s behaviour proves to him that, overpowered by their emotions, women can easily defy and break the social, religious or moral laws and boundaries at any time. Bhagya makes Somnath even more furious by mentioning that if Chuyia is married to an old man she will still be in danger of being overpowered by her *stri-svavahava* or sexuality as her husband will not be able to satisfy her sexually by virtue of his old age. The blatant mentioning of Chuyia’s sexuality by her mother violates Somnath’s sense of matrimonial sanctity and the verbal mention of sex and copulation are seen by him as an indication that Bhagya, being a woman, even at this stage of her life, can lose sight of what is right and wrong. Hence as the scriptures indicate, she can never be trusted. He thinks that the *sadhu* or the *rishi*, Hindu ascetics in search for spiritual salvation or *moksha*, is right in rejecting women because they are an unnecessary diversion and potential source of shame. If men show even the slightest bit of negligence in controlling them, women can easily go wayward, damning their guardians with them. He believes that the effort to keep women in line takes a heavy toll as the energies that men like him at his age should be spending in devout religious practices are wasted on controlling women: “The Bhrahman elders were right: women were dangerous. They sapped a man’s strength and stood between him and salvation” (*Water* 8).

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20. Lustful and passionate nature.

Somnath's inability to give any importance to his wife's perfectly reasonable objection, and his instant dismissal of her opinion, is indicative of the androcentricity that dominates Hindu religious tradition and characterises Hindu culture. Sidhwa's choice to make Chuyia's father a Brahmin priest is significant because it helps her to highlight that in the hands of men like him religion will always be a powerful tool for patriarchy to wield control over the bodies of women. Somnath's dialogues show that the Hindu Brahmin ideology construes women to be more corporeal and thus spiritually weak in comparison to men. The leakiness of their bodies manifested through the continuous release of various fluids indicates the inability of their bodies to be neatly enclosed and defined. This inability to be contained consequently makes their bodies a source of constant pollution and contamination. For Hindu women this abstract idea forms a viable and physical part of their everyday lives in the form of practices associated with purity. In Hinduism maintenance of a pure existence forms a significant part of the life of a Brahmin man who is trying to achieve salvation by fulfilling his *dharma*. This man avoids all those who are temporarily or permanently affected from impurity, the former as applicable to women and the latter to *shudras*.

According to Vivienne Kondos "The categorization of women, of untouchables and of everything else so labelled, as impure, is the belief that they are either temporarily or permanently caught in the *tamasic* or destructive phase of a generative cycle" (5). A woman becomes impure when she menstruates or gives birth to a child. However, these phases of impurity are temporary, provided that *tamasic* phases are succeeded by generative cycles, meaning menstruation is followed by pregnancy and the birth of the child is followed by his/her maturation. A virgin who does not marry and becomes pregnant, a married woman who is infertile or whose children die during childbirth and, most importantly, a menstruating widow are all believed to be permanently caught in the *tamasic* or destructive cycle and thus, are a source of pollution. These women are a source of contamination for anyone who comes in contact with them and hence are pushed to the margins of the society. Interestingly, even in the temporary phases of impurity, the women are not allowed to be part of religious services and men (particularly from the high caste) distance themselves from them until purity is restored.

Menstruating women and women who have recently given birth to a child, in other words, states which emphasize their "femaleness" must be

segregated. Even inadvertent contact with them causes much greater ritual pollution than does contact with a member of the untouchable castes. In a state of ritual impurity women can cause untold harm to their families, and should an impure woman accidentally contaminate a god or deity it may cause illness or even death to members of her family. (Chakravarti, "Gender" 2253)

Throughout *Water* we catch glimpses of this doctrine affecting women. For example, in the beginning of the novel, when Chuyia is getting married, the readers are told that food for menstruating women was left outside the temple where the ceremony was taking place: "since the presence of menstruating women would defile the wedding and pollute the temple, food would be left for them at their doors" (*Water* 19). The separation of the menstruating women is a significant example of how patriarchy, in Hindu culture, has used religion to negatively construe women's bodies, burdening them with shame and turning the biological signs of their femininity into their abhorring cultural symbols, particularly if they fail to productively channel their sexuality as wives and mothers.

This construction of a woman's body is reminiscent of the medieval Western socio-religious philosophical view of the female body. Both systems of thought concede that if a person is born as a woman in the world, then its spirit is trapped in a body which is governed by inferior, biological, material forces. Their ability to menstruate, lactate and reproduce indicates a fluidity of existence that is always breaking out and contaminating boundaries. Similarly, the doctrine of *strisvabhava/stridharma* coupled with the notion of purity makes marriage compulsory for a Hindu woman. In Hinduism without marriage, a menstruating woman is just a moral threat, a temptress, an inauspicious woman: ". . . such a woman untamed by wifehood and motherhood, is . . . liability to her kin, her caste, and to society in general" (Chakravarti, "Gender" 2249).

While the path of the life of a Brahmin man chartered in the form of the *ashrama* system in Hindu religious traditions declares the private, public and spiritual worlds as the spheres of his action, we do not find an equivalent model for Hindu women. For Hindu women the parallel model is a three-phased structure of *triguna* which interestingly defines their roles in terms of the biological functions of their bodies and consequently confine them to the private sphere. In "The Triple Goddess and the

Processual Approach to the World”, Kondos argues that in Hindu mythology when the dual model of the feminine force as being *Shakti* and *Prakrti* is conceived in relation to the doctrine of *gunas*, it results in, what she calls, a “processual view of femininity” or *triguna* at the cosmic, biological, social and sexual level (242). Cosmically, *Shakti* is said to move through the phases of creativity (*rajas*), integration (*sattva*) and disintegration (*tamas*). In human terms, these equal the three phases in a woman’s biological life-cycle—the premenstrual stage, menstrual stage and the post menopausal stage. This in return creates stereotypical social roles for women:

. . . the first, pre-menstrual stage, which culminates in the gift of the pure virgin, full of creative potential to her husband; the second, reproductive stage, in which pregnancy is succeeded by maternal nurturance; and the third, post-menstrual stage, in which infertility culminates in disintegration and death . . . [T]he three [archetypes] in the processual model are related as stages in a developmental sequence, with each containing the potential realization of those that follow. A virgin who does not become a wife is a source of both fear and shame for her kin; a wife who does not become a mother is a powerless failure; a woman who dies after her husband will not have a satisfactory rebirth. (Allen 16)

This ideology reinforces biological essentialism and naturalises the role of women as wives and mothers. Marriage emerges as a normative institution for women, as it allows them to successfully transit from one stage to the next in a naturally ordained and socially acceptable way. Identifying them as virgins, wives and mothers, the doctrine of *triguna* creates justification for men to exert control over their bodies, particularly their sexuality. Most importantly, defining womanhood in these terms marginalises and excludes unmarried women (spinsters), widows, and childless women, making their existence seem an abomination against natural order.

Thus, according to the Dharmashastras a woman becomes a person, a social entity only through and after her marriage. For an upper caste Hindu woman the legal, social and religious sanctification of her existence is not possible without marriage. It is marriage through which she becomes complete, through which she realises her potential and gives meaning to her *self* or *being*. To convince an unhappy Bhagya, Somnath tells

her not to forget that according to the Hindu religious and cultural traditions marriage is inevitable for Chuyia. Without marriage there is no respectable place in Hindu culture for a woman, she is either a whore or a wife/mother: “In the Brahminical tradition a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then does she become a *sumangli*, an auspicious woman, and a *saubhagyavati*, a fortunate woman” (*Water* 8). In the *Dharmashstras* it is stipulated that a woman should be married as early as possible and her husband must actively engage in sexual activity on a regular basis to keep her satiated—so much so that punishment has even been prescribed for those husbands who fail to bed their wives after menstruation cycles. Whereas, for the wife it is commanded that she must be: “. . . a servant *dasi* or *cheri*-in work, as a mother at mealtimes, and as a prostitute or *kulta* in *prem riti* or love making, *raat main veshya samaan*” (Manu qtd. in Sangri 35).

This is a very interesting quotation from Manu as it throws light on how marriage is constructed in Hinduism. The continuous stress on the sexuality of women in various stipulations related to marriage seems to indicate that the main motive behind marriage is not to build a harmonious (spiritual, social or intellectual) relationship between two individuals seen as equals. Rather, the basic concern working behind marriage is to control women’s sexuality socially, to make sure that they use it in ways beneficial for men and to keep them confined inside the house, always under the control of men. The use of the term *veshya* (prostitute) is also a significant analogy because it reflects that women are expected to be modest and cautious in their behaviour in general, as wantonness or a strong expression of sensual desire characterises a whore. Similarly, women are allowed to be passionate, though only temporarily, and not for their sexual fulfilment, but to please their husbands.

The emphasis and centrality of women’s sexuality in Hindu marriage is further depicted by the elaborate rituals and symbolism associated with the marriage ceremony itself. Sidhwa introduces her readers to this symbolism through the marriage ceremony of Chuyia. Chuyia’s wedding day begins with the all-important *haldi-uptan* ritual. Turmeric paste is applied to the body of the young virgin as it is believed locally to heat up the body for the sexual act. Furthermore, the rubbing of *uptan*, a herb, is said to make the body soft to the touch and to induce a healthy glow to the skin. Even today, this ritual is performed in Indian society to make the bride look beautiful and to induce sexual vigour so that the copulation is fruitful. Sidhwa’s narrator evokes precisely this

ritual: “The day of the wedding began early for the bride with the *haldi uptan* ritual. Chuyia’s aunt rubbed the turmeric paste all over her niece’s firm, little body. ‘I don’t want to turn yellow’, she cried . . . ‘Don’t worry; the uptan has magical properties that will make you love your husband’” (*Water* 18). In Hindu marriages, the bride usually wears bangles, of gold or glass, which symbolises her status as a married, fertile woman. Moreover, the bride, usually decked in jewels, is dressed in a red *sari* or wedding dress. The red colour of the dress, as well as of the *sindoor* or “vermilion” worn in the hair, is said to symbolise vigour and passion. During the ceremony itself, the bride is usually dressed and helped by married women, blessing the bride to be platitudinous in her life.

The union with her husband allows a woman to school and socialise her demonic nature and to use her sexual energies in morally and socially appropriate ways. A woman who is married and submits to her husband is respected and idealised as a pure woman. At the beginning of Sidhwa’s novel, while Somnath waits to talk to Bhagya, he admires her as a woman who has fulfilled her wifely *dharma* by harnessing her energies to give birth to his children and to look after her house: “Somnath waited patiently. Even though her body had thickened with childbearing, she was as beautiful as the goddess Bhagyalakshmi, whose name she bore. And with the passion of youth diluted by the daily grind of household tasks and the passage of time, she was surely as pure as the goddess Sita” (*Water* 5).

As a wife, a woman’s *dharma* is *pativrata*, meaning ‘to worship her husband like a god’. She is to submit to her husband completely, to obey his command and follow her him, in life as well as death, without any consideration of his merits or demerits as a person. When Chuyia’s mother-in-law asked her to accompany a dying Hira Lal to the holy ghats along the banks of Ganga for his final services, Somnath agrees to send her: “Hira Lal’s wife must be at his side. It is the moral thing to do” (23). As wife, it is a woman’s duty to be loyal to her husband and chaste, not to question his authority and to fulfil his every command. And it is the duty of a husband to admonish or punish his wife if she fails her wifely duties or if her behaviour falls out of line. Chuyia’s mother is quickly cut to size and reminded of her place when she tries to disagree with her husband’s decision about their daughter’s marriage:

The hard glint in her husband's eyes pierced Bhagya like an arrow hurled by the legendary Arjuna; he had never looked at her this way before. Frozen with the weight of a hoary tradition that brooked no deviation, his look chilled her to the blood . . . Bhagya, overwhelmed by her husband's fury, knew she had overstepped her bounds. She dropped her eyes. Her husband was right; his words bore the cumulative wisdom of gods and ancient sages. . . . 'I am sorry', she said humbly, duly chastened. (8-9)

Myths from religious scriptures are often narrated and quoted to young women to condition them for their future roles as wives and mothers. These myths construct a model of femininity in which a woman is predominantly valued for her subservience, gentle mannerisms, modesty, and beauty, but most importantly for her unflinching support of her husband, in spite of his mistreatment. In *Water* we are told that Shakuntala was named by her parents after a mythical character from the scriptures. When Chuyia asks Shakuntala to narrate the story of this character, the reader interestingly finds out that it is about a woman who was married and abandoned by her powerful husband. She bears her misfortunes bravely, remains loyal to him throughout her life, and in the end it is her fierce loyalty, subservience and devotion that brings her husband back to her. From the beginning of the story this mythical woman Shakuntala is described in terms of her physical beauty and modest behaviour: "Shakuntala was given by her father to the sage Kanva, head of a forest *ashram*. The sage loved her like a daughter, and Shakuntala grew up to become a most beautiful and modest woman. Her voice was sweet and her manners sober and gracious" (89).

Indian mythological traditions are populated by other characters like Shakuntala who endorse a similar model of subservient femininity. Although in the Smritis we find references to women who are strong and who challenge the unjust conduct of their husbands, it is characters like Shakuntala, Sita or Parvati who are perpetuated as models, as Ee-Jia suggests:

Nabar had argued that the influence of mythology is an insidious one, serving to strengthen the fears and illusions which are used to govern the woman and instill docility, "there is a fundamental parity between our perpetuation of mythical stereotypes like Sita and Draupadi and our

present day reluctance to admit any change that threatens the andocentric, patriarchal setup”. (371)

Sita was married to Ram and followed him during his temporary exile in the forest. From there she was abducted by Ravan, who tried to seduce her but she remained chaste and loyal to her husband. When she became pregnant after being rescued by Ram, she was asked to give *agni-pariksha*, or “walk on fire”, to prove that the child was Ram’s. In spite of being successful, she was later exiled by her husband after he heard a small slanderous remark about her character. Sita raised her two sons alone and then towards the end came to the aid of Ram when he was weakened by his enemy. The myth of Sita forms the central part of *Ramayan*, one of the two epics included in Smritis. She is the incarnation of the ideal wife, her conduct the perfect fulfilment of a wife’s *dharma* by practising virtues like loyalty, chastity, sacrifice, endurance and protection of her husband with *Shakti* when he was vulnerable. Sociological and anthropological researchers have found Sita to be the most well-known, beloved and idealised mythical character among Hindu women of various classes and castes, as Nabaneeta Dev Sen suggests:

Several years ago, Sally Sutherland showed that for ninety per cent of the Indians she interviewed, Sita was their favourite (mythical) woman. . . . It is always Sita and Savitri. They are the saviours. Savitri saved her husband from death, Sita saved him from disgrace. Although Sita's life can hardly be called a happy one, she remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide, through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently. (para. 5)

Sidhwa shows that if a Hindu woman fails to convert her wifeness into motherhood then she is a failure, no matter how devoted, chaste or loving she is. And more importantly, until she provides male heirs for her husband, she is said to have failed him, religiously and socially, as a wife. In *Water* Somnath strenuously admonishes his wife not to forget the purpose of a woman’s creation when Bhagya objects to Chuyia’s marriage: “You are the wife and daughter of Brahmin priests; surely you are aware of our traditions . . . outside marriage the wife has no recognised existence in our tradition. A woman’s role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That’s all” (9). According to the *triguna* model of

femininity, Nature demands that the creative, fertile phase of a virgin must be succeeded by that of a nurturing mother: “According to a 1988 report by India's Department of Women and Child Development, ‘The Indian woman on an average has eight to nine pregnancies, resulting in a little over six live births, of which four or five survive. She is estimated to spend 80 percent of her reproductive years in pregnancy and lactation.’” (Anderson and Moore sec. pregnant). Thus, in Hindu culture being female is synonymous with being a mother, “femininity is maternity” (Ee-Jia 370).

Sidhwa’s novel shows her readers that a culture (like the one we see in *Water*) that is marked by the reductive tendency to essentialise women on the basis of the reproductive ability of their bodies, and which attaches high value to the fertility of women can turn out to be bleak, gruesome and persecuting for those women who exist as the other of the acceptable model of femininity: that is, the widow, the spinster and even the sonless mother. To a great extent, *Water* is Sidhwa’s exposure of some of the worst forms of public humiliation, neglect, destitution, sexual exploitation and marginalisation that is the fate of those women who become widows in a traditional Hindu society.

### ***2.3.3 In Grip of Bad Karma—The Inauspicious Widow***

According to the customs of Hindu marriages, once a girl is married her natal family do not have any claim over her. The death of a husband means that a widow is left on her own, without an agent to directly control her or to provide for her. The result is that, like the unmarried virgin, a menstruating widow becomes a potential threat. Brahmin patriarchy’s fear of a woman’s sexuality and the need to exercise control over it, which had previously necessitated the institution of marriage for women, has used the religious discourse centred on bad *karma* to solve the problem of these unattended women. Historically, this doctrine of *karma* has been highly influential in justifying the persecution of Brahmin widows. (For details, see Chakarvarti; Omvedt; Anderson; Chen; Major; Sogani).

According to Hinduism, life in the material universe operates in a cyclic pattern of continuous deaths and rebirths that extend over long intervals of time—a phenomenon termed *Samsara*. Like the macrocosm, the human life also follows the rule of *Samsara*, however, when applied to it, this doctrine acquires moral overtones. In

human life *Samsara* does not take place arbitrarily, rather, it follows the principle of *Karma*, literally translated as ‘action’. According to this law, every individual’s reincarnation in this world is determined on the basis of his/her own actions in the previous life; thus, an individual who fails to fulfil his/her *dharma* will earn a bad *karma*, and vice versa.

Texts like the Dharmashastras have clearly mentioned widowhood as a sign of divine punishment, inflicted on those women who have lead a sinful life in their last incarnation and who have failed to atone for their sins in this life. According to scriptures, “A demonic and innately promiscuous nature is ascribed as their lot due to previous bad ‘*karma*’ that produces female birth; it must be suppressed in favour of their functions as wives” (Chakravarti, “Gender” 2249). A husband’s death means that a wife has shown negligence in fulfilling her wifely *dharma* and as a result her bad *karma* had killed her husband. From the status of being an auspicious married woman, with her husband’s death she is deemed to be an inauspicious creature, who, deprived of her productive role as wife and mother, no longer has any place in the social or familial structure. She becomes an outcast, an abomination. As a failure, her existence becomes a symbol of shame, a source of pollution to herself and to others: “As a widow, however, she became the most inauspicious of all inauspicious things, an ogress that ate her husband with her karmic jaws, polluted by the association with death and the misfortune which she had inadvertently brought upon her husband” (Major xxviii).

As a penance for her bad *karma*, the widow is traditionally ordained to practice *sati* either literally or symbolically. Literally, the practice of a widow self-immolating on the husband’s pyre came to be viewed at the highest level of “*Sat*” (virtue, purity), an ideal to be aspired to by every widow. However, if she is unable to self-immolate, then she is to commit *sati* symbolically by following a strict code of celibacy. She is to live a life of severe abstinence from all sorts of pleasures and comforts of the flesh, whether sexual, gustatory or tactile, in order to atone for her bad *karma*.

Her body and sexual vigour, which for a married woman is an asset, becomes the biggest enemy of a widow after her husband’s death. Her presence becomes an even greater moral threat than that of an unmarried woman. Therefore, to control and contain her sexuality in the absence of male supervision, the Smritis have prescribed very detailed, harsh and strict codes of conduct for a widow. She is doomed to live a life of

abstinence from all sorts of pleasures and comforts of the flesh, whether they are sexual, gustatory or tactile. She is not allowed to wear a stitched dress, must avoid wearing any coloured clothes. The approved dress code for a widow is a white unstitched *sari* with which she must cover herself. Just as the red colour of the wedding dress symbolises a woman's status of active sexuality, similarly the white colour becomes a depiction of her now dormant sexuality. The wearing of an unstitched white sari also strongly resembles the ascetic practicing abstinence from the pleasures of flesh. She is not allowed to have hot or spicy food, as spices are popularly thought to heat up the body and arouse sexual desires. The Dharmashastras encourage her to live a life of self-control and abstinence:

Let her emaciate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruits; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died. Until her death let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled and chaste and strive to fulfill that most excellent duty which is prescribed for wives who have one husband. (Chakravarti, "Gender" 2251)

As widowhood is seen to result from bad *karma*, as punishment historically widows, particularly Brahmin widows, were not allowed to remarry. Today, however, Hindu widows do not suffer from the same strict stipulations and often get married again. In the traditional Hindu society, there is a detailed list of rituals that culturally and symbolically mark the beginning of widowhood for a woman. For example, her bangles, a cultural sign of being married, are broken; her *sindoor* or *kukum* is removed and she can never wear it again; her *mangalsutra* is removed; she is made to wear a white sari; she cannot adorn herself or her face with any makeup, to the extent that historically in some parts of India widows were even subjected to *tonsure* or shaving of the head. She is sworn to lead a life of celibacy and, like an ascetic, is expected to withdraw from social life. According to some of the most discriminating religious texts:

[A widow] should give up adorning her hair, chewing betel-nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to her eyes; she should wear a white garment, should curb her senses and anger, she should not resort to deceit and tricks, should be free from laziness and

sleep, should be pure and of good conduct, should always worship God, should sleep on the floor at night on a mat of “Kusa grass”, she should be intent on concentration of mind and on the company of good. (Sogani 7)

The rituals and practices associated with widowhood in Hinduism are highlighted by Sidhwa through the characters of Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala and other widows living in the Rawalpur *ashram*. Sidhwa shows that just as women accused of adultery were made to wear a mark like Hester’s (an “A”) in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, similarly these rituals brand the bodies of Hindu women into embodiments of their past sins, turning them into a public spectacle of shame. Martha Alter Chen reports in *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India* that widowhood has come to be dreaded by Hindu women not only because of its grief and trauma, but also because of the shame and guilt linked with it (3).

Sidhwa’s decision to use Chuyia as the protagonist of her novel gives her a certain advantage. Portraying the innocent consciousness of a child like Chuyia, whose mind has not yet fully absorbed the ideological, cultural or religious values of her society, to view the lives of the Brahmin widows at Rawalpur, helps Sidhwa to create an ironic contrast between the socio-religious perception/theorisation of these widows and the reality of their existence. By making Chuyia one of the victims of the persecution and oppression resulting from widowhood, Sidhwa’s narrative not only challenges the rationality of a monolithic condemnation of all (Brahmin) widows, irrespective of their age and circumstances, but also questions the compliance and criminal silence of the society that condones the marginalisation and suffering of widows.

Just as a detailed ritualistic custom marks the beginning of a married life for a woman in India, similarly, Sidhwa shows that the descent of a Brahmin woman into widowhood is also marked by a set of reciprocal rituals and customs. *Water* captures these steps by showing Chuyia’s initiation into widowhood. After the death of Hira Lal, Chuyia’s former husband, all things signifying Chuyia’s status of wifehood are removed from her body. Her bangles are broken, her *sindoor* and *mangalsutra* are removed: “Suddenly her mother-in-law loomed over Chuyia, and before Chuyia had time to react she jerked the *mangalsutra* off her neck and the beads scattered on the ground. She grasped Chuyia’s hand and using a brick, violently smashed the red glass bangles” (*Water* 33). Chuyia is stunned into a speechless silence and with questioning, astonished

eyes looks into the face of her mother-in-law for answers, only to realise that with the completion of the ritual she had ceased to exist for her. Sidhwa's depiction of the entire incident is significant. Before delivering the news of Hira Lal's death to Chuyia her father asks her if she remembers getting married (31). The child has no memory of the incident and later on in the novel, as well, all she seems to recall of her wedding day is the colourful costumes, the bangles and the abundance of food. "The mechanizations of the adult world [being] a mystery" (134) for her, the breaking of the mangalsutra and the tonsure is shown to hold as little significance for her as did the haldi-upton ritual of her marriage. During her marriage ceremony she looked like a "diminutive doll" (19) beside Hira Lal and now in the ceremony of her widowhood initiation she is an "inanimate object" (33) under the hands of her mother-in-law and later, after being tonsured and attired like a widow, she, as a "newly-minted widow like a doll" (34) is displayed before the people present at her husband's funeral. When placed side-by-side the images from Chuyia's marriage ceremony and widowhood initiation create an ironic contrast, revealing marriage and widowhood to be two sides of the same coin. Sidhwa shows that the bodies of women, whether in marriage or in widowhood, are nothing more than passive and silent objects which are played with and manipulated by men or the patriarchally structured culture.

Another widow character in *Water* is Bua, an aged resident at the Rawalpur Ashram who is equally unable to recall any details of her wedding except the colours and the abundant food. Their innocent oblivion is cleverly depicted by Sidhwa to underscore the tragedy of child-brides like Chuyia, Bua, Madhumati and Kalyani, who become widows even before they have a chance to become wives: a senseless progression much like being condemned as a criminal even before a crime has been committed. Sidhwa's use of the analogy of a doll becomes an apt depiction of the situation, existence and position of females like Chuyia within the Hindu socio-religious structure which, dominated by men, sees them as nameless, faceless, voiceless objects of pleasure to be used and played with whenever and however the heart desires; only to be thrown away or discarded without the slightest hesitation when they outlive their utility. Sidhwa shows that burdened by the weight of religious, social or moral traditions Indian brides/widows, like Chuyia, lack the agency to stop, question or even comprehend the extent and nature of the injustice committed against them at the key moments in their lives. Like blank surfaces, their fates are inscribed by the men in their

families while these women are made to watch their lives unfold before them from the outside, like spectators.

Sidhwa uses the various stories of the widows living in the *ashram* at Rawalpur, like Shakuntala and Madhumati, to expose the economic factors underlying the construction and practice of widowhood in Hindu society, particularly in the temporal context of the pre-independence India with its commonly practiced custom of child-marriages. Unlike Kalyani, Chuyia or Madhumati who never had a chance to consummate their marriages or live with their in-laws, Shakuntala is shown to have lived a happy matrimonial life with her husband and readers are told she commanded the love, influence and respect of her husband as well as her in-laws. But after the death of her husband, Shakuntala's in-laws take away all her possessions and jewellery, leaving her with "a piece of white cloth" with which to cover herself. She is "essentially slowly starved" by them, given a single bowl of rice without any seasoning, along with some pulses. Her food, actions, clothes and movements are constantly watched by them. When their ill treatment forces her to leave them, "her husband's family was happy to get rid of her" (149-150) and she does not hear from them afterwards. Her two sons are also taken away from her and in the course of the novel she never sees them again. Similarly, we are told that Madhumati was married off by her father with a huge dowry, but after she becomes widowed on her wedding night, her possessions and property are confiscated by the family of her dead husband. When Madhumati asks her mother-in-law for her part of the dowry and property, Madhumati tells her sons to "Take care of the brazen hussy" (70), after which she is repeatedly raped by her two brothers-in-law for seven days, before being left in the wilderness for dead. Madhumati was fourteen at that time.

By incorporating the stories of the financial exploitation of the widows living at the Rawalpur Ashram, Sidhwa is able to show that the curse of *karma*, so stringently ascribed to widows, has in fact a strong economic and financial basis. Just as the bodies of young women are used by the families of the bride and the groom to further their financial interests, so the religious traditions built around widowhood, with their emphasis on celibacy, are used by the families of the dead husbands to protect their wealth and inheritance. The gendered social structure in India gives men the role of breadwinners and makes women their nurturing partners. This gendering of the private and public roles makes women completely dependent on the male members (fathers,

brothers, husbands and sons) of their families for financial support before and after marriage. After being married a woman in India becomes the sole responsibility of her in-laws, likewise, becoming a widow means that she is deprived of her legitimate social source of income and sustenance. Conceived in the role of a wife and mother only, the death of a woman's husband makes her lose her utility for society and in particular for the in-laws. In the traditional joint-family systems that structure South Asian societies, a widow's existence is, thus, reduced to an economic burden and an extra mouth to feed. The detailed code of celibacy that Hinduism decrees a widow must practise is used by most of the families to get rid of this financial burden, as we see in the case of Shakuntala and Madhumati.

Madhumati's father gifted her land and money at the time of her marriage. After the death of her husband, Madhumati's inheritance and wealth were usurped by her in-laws, while she was forced to live a life of celibacy in name of widowhood. When Madhumati demanded her legal inheritance from her in-laws, she was brutally raped by her brothers-in-law and was left in wilderness to die. Similarly, after the death of her husband, Shakuntala was gradually pressured into leaving her house through the inhumane treatment of her in-laws, which they justified in name of the celibacy. This was a clever tactic used by her in-laws, because, as the mother of two sons Shakuntala had legal guardianship and ownership of her dead husband's property, but if she herself chose to leave her in-laws, she would not have been able to make any claims to it. Thus, she was kept in inhumane conditions by her in-laws and was forced to leave eventually to protect the family wealth and property. Sidhwa shows that the code of celibacy and abstinence attached to widowhood in India is usually used as a cover by families to justify their abuse and exploitation of the widows. If the widow continues to reside with the families of their dead husbands they are usually given a meagre amount of food to eat, while the religious stipulations about widows wearing a white sari and no adornment conveniently saves these families from spending money on procuring basic necessities for widowed women. Moreover, one of the key reasons behind preventing widows from remarrying was to keep the inheritance from falling in the hands of the families the widows marry into<sup>20</sup>. In the worst situations, the widowed women are abandoned by their dead husband's families in *ashrams* like the one we see in *Water*.

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21. In modern India, stipulations against the remarriage of widows are not as strong as they used to be in the times in which the novel is set. Nowadays, widows are allowed to remarry, though it is still not seen in a very positive light.

Once left in *ashrams*, they are expected to fend for themselves by singing in religious ceremonies and rituals<sup>21</sup>. After the death of Kalyani, when Shakuntala tries to console Narayan by pointing out there must be some divine reason behind the way religious traditions have treated widows for centuries, he bitterly points out that the true reason behind the marginalisation, celibacy and the notion of bad *karma* is nothing but protection of economic interests: “One less mouth to feed. Four saris, one bed to let – somewhere a corner saved for another widow. There is no reason. Disguised as religion, it’s just about money” (*Water* 181).

Whether the widows live with their in-laws or are abandoned in *ashrams*, either way the institution of widowhood, with its emphasis on widows practising a celibate lifestyle, provide the families of their dead husbands with an excellent opportunity to cut down financial costs and get access to cheap labour for housework but, most important of all, it helps them to retain the dead brother/son’s wealth/property within the family and stop it from going into the hands of the widow or her family.

Sidhwa’s novel questions the logic of marginalising widows within the socio-economic structure of Hindu society by highlighting the life of destitution and poverty these widows are forced to live for the atonement of their supposed sins, along with the physical, emotional and sexual abuse and exploitation that becomes their fate because of the discriminatory way the institution of widowhood is constructed and practiced in Indian culture. Sidhwa shows that having been abandoned to their fates in the *ashrams*, widows like Chuyia, Kalyani, Bua and Shakuntala either beg for their one meal of the day outside the temples or earn it by singing hymns in various religious services in the temples:

The widows formed a long, snaking line as they sat outside the temple in their white saris with their begging bowls . . . They had grown as accustomed to begging as they had to the grueling hours of singing in temple halls to earn a few coins and a fistful of rice. Without these handouts, they would starve. They had long ago lost their initial sense of shame and humiliation at accepting alms. The irony was that most of the widows, from villages in Bengal and neighbouring Bihar, were from

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22. The destitution and misery that widows have to face in India is covered in detail by Martha A. Chen in *Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action* (1998).

landowning families and were in fact accustomed to giving alms to the less fortunate. (*Water* 97)

When Chuyia sees these widows singing at the temple for the first time, her senses are so overwhelmed and appalled by the dreariness, misery and lifelessness emitting from their emaciated bodies that she runs away from the scene (48). Sidhwa contrasts Chuyia's view of the miserable life led by the widows with the public reception of and reaction to the presence of widows around them. This contrast allows her to foreground the huge gulf that exists between how religious traditions ascribe things to be and how they actually exist. When Chuyia laughs out loud at the antics of a small puppy she was washing with Kalyani, an old woman nearby glares at them for forgetting the decorum of a widow (59); afterwards when Kalyani accidentally bumps into a married woman she is loathingly called a filthy and polluted woman, having no shame or morality (60). Similarly, when Shakuntala goes to the river to fetch holy water for the temple, a priest performing a marriage ceremony there asks her not to let her ill-fated shadow fall on the wedding party for it will pollute and curse them (94). When Chuyia is found running in the market or is secretly buying sweets from a shop, the shopkeepers comment that the widows should not be allowed to move about in the market, for their polluted presence brings bad luck to the business (60 and 97).

Citing such examples of the representation of public humiliation and degradation with which widows are uniformly treated in Hindu society puts a question mark on the logic of punishing them for their ostensible sins. Seeing a young child like Chuyia and a very old woman like Bua being treated in the same manner makes one wonder where the punishment starts and where it ends. When Chuyia's father tells her that she has become a widow, with a child's innocence she asks him how long she will have to remain one (32). If widowhood is really to be taken as a punishment for one's sins, Hindu religious traditions suggest no way other than being reborn to determine when this punishment ends and whether a widow has really atoned for her sins. By showing that most of the women at the Rawalpur ashram became widows because their natal families married them to very old men, *Water* contests the religious claims that these women suffer because of their past crimes or bad *karma*. Seeing the Hindu women being treated as puppets in the hands of families who orchestrate the doomed fate of their own daughters, one wonders at the logic and truth behind the doctrine of *karma*.

Sidhwa exposes another ugly side of the institution of widowhood, one which still proliferates in today's India. Those widows who are not fortunate enough to obtain food through the relatively respectable way of begging or singing in the temples are forced to sell their bodies to the rich and wealthy. In *Water* Madhumati, Kalyani and in the end even Chuyia are all forced into prostitution for the sake of meeting the expenses of the ashram. As mentioned in the introductory section of the chapter, in the holy cities of India like Benaras, where a large number of *ashrams* for widows exist, prostitution is quite common. Narayan's friend, Rabindra, whose father regularly seeks the services of prostitutes, bitterly points out to him that "the gentry here have an 'unnatural concern' for the widows" (73). What is, however, ironic about his comment is that he publicly blames and feels disgusted by the widows selling their bodies to men like his father, but fails to denounce the men who buy their services. His attitude is reflective of the hypocrisy of a society that is ready to punish women on the slightest pretext of negligence, disobedience, bad rebirth and even for the crimes in which they themselves are the victims (like the forced prostitution), but is not ready to punish men or those who are responsible for the misfortune of these women. In a patriarchal society, like the one depicted by Sidhwa in *Water*, a woman as a whore is guilty enough to be penalised and marginalised, but her customer will always retain the pretence of a noble person. It seems highly ironic that the Hindu religious tradition sees fit to punish the widowed women for their past sins but turns a blind eye towards the actions of the men who perpetuate violence and abuse towards them. Sidhwa clearly shows the Brahmin Hindu society of *Water* is a patriarchal society because it always protects the interests of men and treats women as dispensable objects. The same society that punishes women if their husbands die before them allows Brahmin men to remarry if their wives die or fail to produce sons. This society allows men, like the fathers of Narayan and Rabindra, to keep mistresses and use prostitutes but in the name of the sanctity of religion stops a widow from respectably remarrying.

Sidhwa further shows in her novel that it is not merely men who are the culprits. The system of male oppression is kept in place by the criminal participation of women like Madhumati. After Madhumati's brothers-in-law left her for dead in the wilderness, she was rescued and brought to the Rawalpur ashram. She herself was initiated into the business of prostitution by the elderly widow heading the ashram at that time. Years later, when Madumati took over the ashram after the old woman's death, she in turn

used Kalyani to do the same. She even fetched an unheard-of price for Kalyani's virginity. What is significant about Madhumati's conduct is that though she herself had been the victim of the exploitation and violence of both men and women (it was her mother-in-law who ordered her rape and later on another widow who sent her for prostitution), she never resisted or questioned the cycle of oppression. Rather, she became a willing agent who helped to perpetuate the imbalance of power. Her actions and behaviours signify the double standards that are used to treat women in Hindu culture. In the novel Madhumati forces Kalyani into prostitution on the pretence of meeting the expenses of the ashram, while in reality a major part of the income is used by Madhumati to satisfy her drug addiction. When Kalyani shows the inclination to leave prostitution and marry Narayan, Madhumati becomes furious and, cursing Kalyani, locks her up, arguing that her remarriage will pollute all the widows living in the *ashram*. Madhumati conveniently forgets that she herself has been forcing Kalyani into committing immoral actions. Madhumati's use of Hindu religious precepts is similar to the way Hindu patriarchy uses and interprets religion to control and exploit women. There is little difference between Madhumati and the Hindu men who first rape and sexually abuse widows and then go on to denounce them in public for their bad *karma* and polluted existence. Madhumati acts as an agent of patriarchy and her final act of violence is to send an unwitting Chuyia to Narayan's father for prostitution after Kalyani commits suicide.

Sidhwa shows yet another form of violence that women inflict on themselves under the influence of patriarchy. She shows that plagued by the images of possessing a hyper-sexualised body and stereotyped as seductress and temptress in popular thought, women see themselves as the perpetrators of their own doom if a sexual crime is committed against them. As indicated through the sexual exploitation of widows, the patriarchal social structures use the ideology of the claimed wantonness of women to justify the sexual crimes against them. When Kalyani finds out that Narayan's father has been one of her clients, rather than blaming him for taking advantage of her situation or questioning the social system that allows for the sexual exploitation of widows, she sees herself as the culprit who led Narayan astray with her beauty. Although a victim herself, she accuses herself of wrongly desiring to remarry and continues to think of Narayan's family as noble and virtuous:

With every passing moment, a new tormenting thought struck her, and she flagellated herself with blame. . . . She should have known better, kept her distance from Narayan. . . . Had she seduced him with languishing looks, small flirtations? She should not have allowed herself to fall in love with him, and let him fall so hard for her. . . . Nor could she saddle Narayan's noble family with a daughter-in-law whose every living moment would bring disgrace and dishonor to their house. . . . What contempt, what loathing would the Seth have for her? What must his mother think of her? The thought was unbearable. Filled with self-loathing, she cringed in terror against the wall. (175-176)

This incident shows that the religious and social ideology, once absorbed by women continues to act as a Foucauldian system of self-regulation for them, who in spite of being victims of social stigmatisation, destitution and sexual abuse due to the discriminating nature of the institution of Brahmin widowhood, continue to strengthen the hands of the oppressor.

Sidhwa has highlighted in her novel that the main purpose behind condemning widows to a life of celibacy is to control and curb their sexual appeal. The widows are not allowed to eat spicy food, wear colourful clothes or adorn themselves because their active sexuality, without any male control, threatens the moral order of society. Through references to the active prostitution of widows and the incident of Narayan falling in love with Klayani, Sidhwa shows the failure of the effectiveness of these traditional customs.

Sidhwa exposes that the reason behind the failure of these religious doctrines is that it is not the hyper-sexualised nature of women which is responsible for the demonised construction of women's bodies, but in fact it is the "*male gaze*"<sup>22</sup> that actively sexualises women and then projects its desire on their bodies, accusing them

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23. The concept of the "male gaze" has been derived from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of human development, where he uses the term of "gaze" to describe the child's encounter with its image in the mirror stage. Feminists have found this concept especially useful to describe the way men actively construct the bodies of women in cinema and other visual media. The work of Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, has been seminal in the modification of Lacan's idea and its consequent application in feminist theory. The "male gaze" refers to a determinist look of a heterosexual male viewer who, as subject and initiator of that gaze, looks or views the body of a woman, projects his desires and fantasies on her form and, most importantly, objectifies her as a sexual object.

for being temptresses and seductresses. While looking at Chuyia's young body Shakuntala muses that the subtle signs of Chuyia's budding sexuality could be read by either a mother's concerned eye or a man's lustful gaze:

Chuyia's sari had slipped from the shoulder, and she lay almost doubled over. Shakuntala noticed the swelling around her breasts. She wondered if they were incipient breasts, or just a fold in the flesh from the way she was hunched over. . . . There were the faintest swell; only a mother's anxious eye would notice it, she thought, smiling to herself, and then the smile froze on her lips as it occurred to her: or a man's lusting eye. (117)

A very significant incident indicating the sexualisation of the bodies of women under the male gaze is narrated in relation to the Brahmin priest Sadananda who attends to the affairs of widows from different *ashrams* of Rawalpur. Sidhwa shows that though the widows who come before this holy man are tonsured, wearing a ghastly white and devoid of the usual ornamentation or beautification, yet all the efforts of desexualising their bodies fail because the lust resides not in their bodies but in the male gaze that looks at them:

Sadananda had long ago come to terms with the occupational hazards of ministering to his flock of widows. When he had first assumed his duties as a young priest, he had been overwhelmed by the proximity of their bodies, ripe beneath coarse, loosely-spun saris that stretched to accommodate each curve and dent of their desirable flesh. . . . He lusted after the young, middle-aged and, except for the very old, even the elderly. . . . The combination of moral turpitude and innocence with the voluptuous joggle of flesh under the saris gave an unsustainably erotic charge. . . . He had succumbed and occasionally taken advantage of the access his position as their priest and mentor gave him. (79)

In another incident, he is shown to catch sight of Shakuntala fetching holy water from the river one early morning as he stands on the steps of *ghats*<sup>23</sup>, getting ready to start the daily morning services. His gaze is filled with lust and all he can see is a “strong, shapely body”, a “rounded flare of the hips”, “high breasts” making “shapely mounds”,

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24. Stairway in India leading down to a landing on the water.

and “indentations of her collarbones” in which he wishes to “bury his lips” (156-157). The anatomically detailed surveys his lusting eyes make of the figures beneath the saris become all the more ironic as the woman’s body under the scrutiny of his gaze is lost in spiritual and religious thoughts. The sexualisation of Shakuntala’s body reverses the traditional binary opposition that equates men with spirituality/rationality and women with body/sexuality by presenting a highly excitable priest whose religious devotion or knowledge does not stop him from visually or physically taking advantage of the widows he supervises.

In *Water*, Sidhwa tries to show that in Indian Brahminical patriarchal society, a woman’s body is nothing more than a medium, a vessel, which has been created by nature for the propagation of the human race. A woman is a valuable commodity for her natal family as well as for her in-laws because of her ability to procreate. Motherhood is not only a status to which a woman should aspire, but according to religious scriptures it is her moral and social duty, the fulfilment of her *dharma*. If a woman fails to conform to the discussed, prescribed models of femininity, she is usually condemned by society. If she fails to fulfil her wifely duties by providing sons, she is turned into an inauspicious creature, and if, unfortunately, her husband happens to die before her then the worst fate awaits her as a widow. The institution of widowhood has been constructed from a point of view that clearly allows men to hold power over the bodies of women and causes the exploitation of widows. Under the influence of the religious traditions, the Brahmin widow becomes an object of divine and public disdain, a permanent source of pollution, and is abandoned to a life of public shame, humiliation and destitution. Sidhwa shows that the bodies of these widowed women are shamed on multiple levels and are then shunned into silence under the burden of their shamed existence. The patriarchal Hindu society states that widows, like Kalyani, Chuyia or Shakuntala, are to feel ashamed because they were born as women and not men in this life; they are humiliated and shamed for causing the death of their husbands by those very families who are responsible for causing the tragedy by arranging hugely mismatched marriages between very young girls and old Hindu men. Lastly, they are to be scorned as a source of pollution and eternal damnation for being the sellers of flesh. The hypocritical social mind-set allows rich and powerful men, like Narayan’s father, to take advantage of these widows without incurring any social stigma or religious reprimand. No longer anyone’s sister, daughter, wife or mother, and bearing the stigma

of a bad *karma*, these widows become the *other women* who, like the prostitute on the street, can be taken advantage of, exploited, used and discarded without the abuser having to pay a price for it or to face any social consequence. These Brahmin widows fall in the same category as the *shudras* or “untouchables” in Hindu society; they are the marginal and the forgotten.

### Chapter 3

Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women . . . some vestigial remoteness obliges me to explain that my reference is to a place where the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant. . . . We naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance. Or else it was a hugely practical joke, we thought, hidden somewhere among our clothes. . . . Against all my own odds I know what I must say . . . there are no women in the third world. (Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days*)

These lines from Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1990) capture a central dichotomy of South Asian societies in relation to the cultural construction of women's identities. Though their bodies make up a dominant part of South Asian demographics, and they make continuous appearances in the literary, religious, artistic and other cultural discourses, as individual, autonomous social agents, women have predominantly existed as an *absent presence* in these cultural narratives. Muted and deprived of their voices, women's bodies and identities have been largely constructed in the popular imagination<sup>24</sup> either in terms of their men-folk or in relation to the biological functioning of their bodies. In literature, for example, the South Asian literary tradition, with its overwhelming majority of male authors, predominantly offers an outsider's view of the bodies, experiences and subjectivities of these women. This normative and prescriptive view constructed by a male onlooker has been contested, challenged and subverted by the inside view of women (and/or feminist) writers focusing on how these women culturally experience their own bodies and lives. In this chapter, I demonstrate that Sidhwa's novel *The Bride* is also one such contestation: this novel challenges the cultural construction of women's bodies in Pakistani society by juxtaposing the patriarchal culture's ideological structure, enacted and voiced by characters like Qasim,

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<sup>24</sup> By popular imagination I mean the collective or shared frame of mind that a community, society or group possesses in terms of commonly shared set of beliefs, ideas, mythical structures, archetypes and aesthetic values.

Sakhi, Farukh and Major Mushtaq, with the material experiences of women like Afshan, Zaitoon, Carol and Hamida within the context of a Pakistani society.

*Culture* as an epistemological category has been defined and applied in myriad, and sometimes even conflicting, ways in various fields of human knowledge. Apart from being subjected to a process of historical development as a term, *Culture* has been in wide circulation in topics related to discussions on arts, literature, anthropology, sociology, ideology, music, media, politics, sports, religion, history, critical theory, economics and even biological sciences. Its application in each field has consequently generated new sets of meanings, complete with their own connotations and denotations. Most of the researchers working in the social sciences and humanities (Williams; Eagleton; Crehan, Jenks; Smith) second the opinion of Raymond Williams, a pioneering figure in the field of *Cultural Studies*, who sees *Culture* as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language,” its complexity in large part resulting from its use for “important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought” (87). The majority of the definitions, whether descriptive, normative, structural, psychological or even genetic, identify *Culture* as an abstract phenomenon, contrasting it with the technological, material and structural aspect of any human society. For some it is the byproduct of other social systems working in a society like economics, politics, power struggles, and it is even seen as a natural consequence of society’s structural requirements. For others, *Culture* exists independently of these processes, and for these theorists, the tendency to reduce it to the level of a byproduct ignores its influential position in shaping human behaviour and thought. Descriptive definitions see *Culture* as an all-inclusive whole which equals the total sum of the social life of a particular society, including patterns of thoughts, actions, behaviours, ideologies, discourses and beliefs. Historical definitions focus on it as human heritage that is transmitted across time from one generation to another. Some definitions see *Culture* as a normative force that defines, motivates and shapes human thought and actions, formulating moral, material and societal values that determine the outcome of interactions, behaviours and attitudes. In psychology, *Culture* acquires an instrumental status that helps an individual to communicate, express and exercise his/her emotional or mental desires in a socially appropriate way. Geneticists are interested in studying it in procedural terms, analyzing how it comes to be as a result of human interaction and intergenerational transmission (Smith 3). In contrast to its earlier

appearance in discussions related to literature, art or even the cultivation of a higher, more refined *self*, it was only during the late nineteenth century that *Culture* came to denote the traditions, customs, norms or non-materialistic aspects associated with everyday life of a community or social group. In the classic studies conducted during the modern era, critics like Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Georg Simmel defined *Culture* as the byproduct of the economic infrastructure and relationships existing in a society. The politics of power, dominance and subversion were thought to be, primarily, the result of class struggle within a social set-up. In their works, the role of *Culture* in sustaining or countermining the existing status quo was relegated to a secondary position. During the twentieth century, one of the most significant breakthroughs in the study of *Culture* was made by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) when he advanced the idea of *cultural hegemony*, which connected *Culture* and politics with economic control and highlighted *culture's* key role in establishing power relationships. Challenging Marx, Weber and others, Gramsci claimed that *Culture* and politics played elementary roles in establishing, maintaining and if required, subverting the hegemonic control and dominance of one group/class/ethnicity/gender over the other. Through *Culture*, one social group, economic class or gender establishes its ideologies or worldview as the naturally ordained order of things, persuading others to agree with their ideals, beliefs and moral systems. The most significant characteristic of cultural hegemony is that the use of various apparatuses of civil society, such as religious, social and educational institutions, media and the arts, allows a group to establish its dominance without any use of brute force. The dominated groups are lulled into a sense of false security and belonging, while experiencing a feeling of collective goodness that coerces them into seeing adherence to the dominant ideology as the rightful course of action, resulting in what can be called their cultural colonisation:

Culture, of course, is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent. In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for understanding of cultural life. (Said, "Introduction" 1280, original italics)

Similarly, *hegemony* in the context of cultural dominance refers to a state where an individual's subjective experiences of dominance and control are masked and transformed by the dominant group into constitutive realities of life through a dynamic interplay between cultural and societal forces:

Hegemony is . . . a lived system of meaning and values—constitutive and constituting—which, as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society . . . beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move. . . . [It is] in the strongest sense a 'culture' but a culture which has also been seen as the lived dominance and domination of particular classes. (Williams 110)

The ideologies of the hegemonic group start appearing as recurrent motifs in cultural discourse which helps them to control and exploit the entire social system, including economics, religion, justice, law, politics, literature and even language, to their own advantage. The State often acts as an accomplice in this process by coercing civil society to maintain the existing status quo through legislation and, when required, force. Gramsci's concept of culture as a coercive force is significant in the context of the present discussion, as the focus of my analysis is to show how cultural constructions of women's bodies have played a major role in the subjugation of women in Pakistani society.

At the risk of sounding overly simple and too general, I define *culture* in the following terms for my analysis: *Culture* is a set of shared human values, beliefs, customs, norms, knowledge and experience that orders, structures and binds together members of a particular community, group or class. It is a prescriptive and normative presence that directs and controls the behaviours, attitudes and outcomes of actions. It is also an enabling force that helps individuals to act, communicate and make sense of life experiences. Due to its pervasive presence, in the hands of the dominant class, it can, however, act as a powerful coercive force. It may include religion, economics, politics, and indigenous systems of knowledge but, at any time, is not reducible to any one of them. It must be remembered that *Culture* is always learned and acquired. Secondly, it is never static and is always in a flux. Both these aspects foreground the *constructed* nature of ideologies propagated and upheld in any culture. Furthermore, the disparity or

difference between two cultures, whether that variation exists spatially or temporally, creates gaps in its unified fabric that allows the marginal or oppressed groups to question the *naturalness* of the hegemonic values and subvert them. This process is a causal requirement for any change that an individual or group wish to create in the existing power structures of a society.

The South Asian country of Pakistan is deemed an Islamic Republic for its 97 percent Muslim population, whereas its economic conditions categorise it as a third world or developing country, and its political history bears the scars of being a former colony of the British Empire. Though she is primarily seen as a Muslim South Asian woman or a third world Muslim woman, the religious, economic and colonial/nationalist locations of a Pakistani woman turns her identity into a highly complex and often problematic category. Due to these multiple locations of a Pakistani woman, national and international discourses often end up stereotyping her into the role of a passive victim of patriarchy and religious fundamentalism: “As South Asian, ‘third world’ women who are also largely Muslims, Pakistani women’s popular representation of living static lives as oppressed and powerless individuals, burdened by both religion and patriarchy, is not all that surprising” (Ahmad 1). Any such depiction of Pakistani women takes a naively simplistic and generalist view of their identities, lives and experiences. “Pakistani woman” is not a monolithic category (Hafiz; Saeed; Maggie; Weiss; Mirza; Haeri; Brown; Ahmad; Hegland; Rouse; Khan, Bhasin and Menon; Minhas; and Toor); rather it is divided and intersected by class, ethnicity, caste, religion, education, geography, and language, thereby creating women who are at the same time “subordinate, powerful, marginal, central, or otherwise, vis-à-vis particular social and power networks” (Mohanty in Ahmad 2). These differences and intersections generate layers of agency and oppression for women within the Pakistani social structure, thus making it difficult to formulate any single statement to describe their status, power and position:

Depending on her geographical location, a Pakistani woman can find herself in a tribal, feudal or urban environment. She can be a highly qualified and self-confident professional, or a ... peasant toiling alongside her menfolk; she can lead a highly cloistered life ... or she can be a central figure of authority in the limited circles of influential women

in government and business circles. The Pakistani woman, then, is a myriad creature for whom a single image does not suffice. To talk of Pakistani women is in fact to talk of groups of women, of clusters of similarity in a disparate reality. ( Mumtaz and Shaheed 21)

Things become more complicated because, more often than not, the bodies of these women are invested with cultural symbolic capital and are used as pawns in the fights between modernist and fundamentalist, religious and state, nationalist and Western, progressive and traditionalist, and even state/religious and feminist forces. In spite of these differences, for the majority of the women living in Pakistan, oppression, discrimination and exploitation by men forms the viable reality of their daily lives. The control and power that patriarchy yields over the bodies of these Pakistani women may differ in intensity, level and extent with changes in class, economy, education level or even geographical location; still, in comparison to men, women in Pakistan largely exist as second-class citizens while their bodies are owned, used and manipulated by men.

Sidhwa's novel *The Bride* highlights the cultural mechanism at work in the heart of Pakistani society which patriarchy has used to establish its hegemonic control over the bodies of women, particularly middle class women. Sidhwa's novel shows that the three key cultural elements that grant men unabated and absolute authority over the bodies of women in Pakistani society are: the institution of marriage, the concept of honour and the construction of female sexuality. These three factors will be the focus of my discussion and analysis of *The Bride* in the following sections.

The story of *The Bride* has been inspired by true events. Sidhwa came across the story for the first time when she stayed at an army camp near Kohistan<sup>25</sup> during her honeymoon. The camp had been set up by the Pakistani army, which was busy building the famous Karakoram highway to China through the mountainous terrain of Pakistan's Northern Province. There she was told of a Punjabi girl who had briefly stayed at the camp before making her way up to Kohistan for her marriage with a tribal man. Chafed by the hostile culture and surroundings, she ran away shortly after her marriage and was hunted down by the tribesmen of her husband's family to avenge the honour that the girl

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<sup>25</sup> Kohistan is part of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

had besmirched by running away. Her decapitated body was later on found in the river. Sidhwa was so moved by the story that she felt compelled to narrate it to the world.

Structurally, the novel comprises of one main plot, with two subplots, and can be roughly divided into four sections. The first section introduces the first subplot with Qasim, a tribal Kohistani man, as its protagonist. It tells the story of Qasim's marriage to Afshan, the death of his family by smallpox, culminating at the point where he becomes the adopted father of Zaitoon after the partition riots. In the second section, the character of Zaitoon starts emerging as the protagonist of the main plot as we see her developing from a small orphaned child to a young, grown-up woman. Zaitoon's story is narrated against the backdrop of Qasim's struggle to come to terms with the cosmopolitan cultural life of Lahore and his budding friendship with Nikka the wrestler and his wife Miriam, who takes on the role of a surrogate mother for Zaitoon. The third section narrates Qasim's pivotal decision to marry Zaitoon to Sakhi, a young tribal man from his old tribe, and her consequent journey from the cosmopolitan (feminine) culture of Lahore, in the Punjab, to the beautiful, rough and masculine mountainous terrain of Kohistan. This section also introduces Carol, a middle class American woman living in Pakistan, as the protagonist of a second subplot. Carol left America after her marriage to Farukh and is staying with her husband at an army camp near Kohistan. Here she briefly meets Zaitoon (before the latter goes to Kohistan for her marriage) and is having an affair with her husband's friend, Major Mushtaq. The last segment encompasses Zaitoon's efforts to settle into her new life, her decision to escape from a violent, abusive husband and her heroic struggle across the treacherous terrain of Kohistan as she is chased by a group of bloodthirsty tribal men. Unlike the original story, Sidhwa gives an optimistic end to Zaitoon's struggle, as she is saved in the end. Temporally speaking, the events narrated in *The Bride* position the action of the novel during the 1950s and the 60s, the decades immediately following the independence of Pakistan. In this sense, the action and the story appear to be dated; yet, the cultural constructs of women's bodies that Sidhwa highlights in her novel still prevail in Pakistani society to varying degrees.

Sidhwa's characterization of the male characters in the novel is not beyond question; the men in her novel, unlike her later and much more mature works, *Ice Candy Man* and *The American Brat*, appear to be one-dimensional figures with little or no redeeming features. Her depiction of the tribal society, and particularly of the

Kohistani men is highly contentious, as she paints them in essentialist and colonial colours by presenting them as savage, brutish and uncouth people belonging to an ancient, primitive world. However, in spite of its weaknesses, *The Bride* remains a significant example of feminist creativity in the Pakistani literary tradition, as Sidhwa unequivocally foregrounds the cultural mechanisms that gender women in the stereotypical roles of mothers, wives and daughters, and then construct their bodies as icons of male honour, thereby making them vulnerable targets of male aggression and control.

### 3.1 Marriage and Women' bodies

We can make two assumptions about the dominant theme of Sidhwa's novel by looking at its title. *The Bride* suggests, first, that the protagonist of the novel is probably going to be a woman, whilst its second title<sup>26</sup> marks the body, thereby the identity, of this woman in spatial and geographical terms, positioning it in the context of Pakistani society. Secondly, the title symbolizes the writer's intention to engage with an identity of the protagonist which has been constructed in *cultural* terms through the institution of marriage, one of the fundamental structural and organizing institutions of human society throughout history. Though the title of the novel suggests that it is a story about a single bride, this is not the case. Rather, the image of a bride serves as a connecting link that joins together the stories of the lives of three women, Afshan, Zaitoon and Carol, each of which highlights the role that culture plays in inscribing women's bodies with patriarchal signification in an effort to control them and turn them into subservient docile bodies. Sidhwa uses their inter-related stories to explore how women like them, caught in the web of patriarchal power in Pakistan, negotiate agency and freedom for themselves, as she also offers a reflection on the price they have to pay for their defiance or subservience.

*The Bride* raises questions about the institution of marriage as it is structured and practiced in Pakistan. Marriage, one of the fundamental structuring and functioning units of society, is depicted by Sidhwa in a way that lays bare its patriarchal underpinnings as a fundamental reason for the oppression of Pakistani women, regardless of socio-economic background. Like the Brahmin Hindu marriages portrayed

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<sup>26</sup> The novel was published in India with the title *The Pakistani Bride*

in *Water*, marriage in *The Bride* is also portrayed as a kind of contract or transaction that takes place between male heads of families who use the bodies of women to further their socio-political or economic agendas. A traditional marriage in Pakistani culture is decided and arranged between the patriarchal heads of the bride and the bridegroom's families. Considerations of political, religious, social and particularly economic gain by both families play a covert, unvoiced, and yet powerful part in finalising most marriage proposals. One of the most obvious forms of acquiring financial benefits through marriage is the cultural custom of the dowry. In a typical marriage in Pakistani culture, a woman, accompanied by a dowry, is given away by her father or the eldest of male kin to her husband in an elaborate ceremony. The quantity of the dowry, given by the bride's father, is usually proportionate to the financial standing of the bride as well as the bridegroom's family. The dowry is disguised as the parental loving impulse to safeguard the comfort of their daughter; the bride's family is usually forced to secure a substantial dowry for their daughter in hopes of ensuring that she is well treated by her in-laws. Sometimes the political or social standing of the bride's family takes precedence over or replaces the direct monetary value of a dowry, and in the case of families too poor to enjoy or reciprocate any such benefit, the acquisition of an able-bodied woman who is able to produce children (particularly sons) and do manual work is seen as a great advantage in itself. The nature of marriage in Pakistani culture as a business contract or transaction is further supported by the fact that many girls fail either to find a good match or even to get married if their families are unable to afford a substantial dowry or to be of any socio-political benefit to potential husbands. Interestingly, in the tribal cultures of Pakistan, the tradition of paying a bride-price is practiced in place of the usual custom of dowry-giving. When a man wants to be married he must pay a certain amount of money or goods to the father or male head of the bride's family. This cultural construction of marriage turns the bodies of women into highly valuable commodities which are sold to the highest bidder, fetching money for their male kin.

In Sidhwa's novel, Afshan's father Resham Khan is shown to be in debt to Qasim's father, a debt which he has been unable to pay back resulting in a bloody feud between the two. Having lost a number of his family members in this feud, Resham Khan wants to end the old animosity. But as he cannot repay his debt in monetary terms, he decides to offer Qasim's father the next best thing. He offers his daughter

Afshan as a cheque to his rival, who in turn is more than happy to accept this proposal. Qasim's father knows that Resham Khan's virginal daughter is far more valuable than any amount of money that Resham Khan owes him: "Resham Khan has promised us his daughter!' The sturdy, middle-aged tribesman knew just how generous the offer was. Any girl—and he had made sure that this one was able-bodied—was worth more than the loan due" (*The Bride* 7). The harshness of existence and low life expectancy levels in these tribal areas makes the body of a young, healthy female an extremely prized commodity due to her ability to reproduce and act as an extra pair of hands to carry out manual labour. In this cultural ideological structure, her status is not different from or greater than other valuable possessions owned by a tribal man, like a herd of cows, a flock of sheep or even a stock of ammunition. Readers are never told how much money Resham Khan owed Qasim's father because, according to the cultural norms of that tribal society, the amount is insignificant. Whether Resham Khan owed him one thousand, one million or just a couple of hundreds, the reaction of Qasim's father and the nature of the feud would have been the same. Thus, Afshan's body is sold by her father but we never come to know the monetary/economic value of this commodity.

The actions of these two fathers hint at the ugly tradition of *vani* or *swara* that is practiced in Punjab and the tribal areas of Pakistan. *Swara* is a tribal tradition followed in the North-west province of Pakistan in which a family gives away their daughter(s), usually of a very young age, in marriage as a kind of reparation for murder or any other serious grievance they might have caused a man or his family: "Generally, girls are given in *swara* marriage as compensation for murder, adultery, abduction and kidnapping committed by the men of the family. Women are compelled to sacrifice by their father, brother or uncle for the crime they have committed. *Jirga* decides the fate of women and the pronouncement of *swara* without the consent of the women concerned" (Usafzai sec. Prelude). The grieved party is usually given the right to choose the girl they want in compensation under the supervision of a congregation of the elders of the community, which is known as *jirga* in the North-West province and *panchaiyaat* in Punjab. If the murdered man has high political/social status or if the extent of the damage is large, the grieved party is sometimes allowed to even take more than two girls. Anwar Hashmi and Mushtaq Koubab report that in December 2002, eight girls were given in *vani* in Mianwali, a city in Punjab, to settle a bloody feud between two families. The youngest among them was one and a half years old. Just as Afshan is

bartered away as payment to Qasim's father, similarly, the bodies of young girls are bought or traded, without any personal agency or choice, through patriarchal customs and traditions like *vani* and *swara*.

Although there is no justification for traditions like *swara* or *vani* in Islam or in the constitution of Pakistan, they continue to be upheld and practiced in Pakistani society as customs and traditions. Furthermore the government's inability to put an end to this form of violence against women indicates how deeply the concept of viewing women's bodies as men's property is ingrained in the social, cultural and political fabric of Pakistani society (Hassan, Y. 20) and how tradition becomes a powerful cultural tool of oppression for women in the hands of patriarchy:

Tradition is in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limit . . . indeed it is the most powerful practical means of cooperation. What we have to see is not just 'a tradition' but a selective tradition: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definitions and identifications. (Williams 114)

The tradition of objectifying women as mere commodities of exchange in male transactions becomes even more glaringly obvious in *The Bride* when Sidhwa highlights the whimsicality of the events that made Afshan Qasim's wife. To start with, Afshan's father sells off his daughter to his rival without even bothering to find out who she will; once sold, Qasim's father becomes the sole proprietor of her body and, as his commodity, it is entirely up to him to dispose of Afshan as he sees fit. After accepting Resham Khan's proposal, he first thinks of marrying Afshan himself, as none of his older, eligible sons are unmarried, and ten-year old Qasim seems too young to have a wife. Plagued by paternal guilt, not wanting to be selfish and trying to take advantage of such a good bargain, he decides to marry Afshan to Qasim anyway. He was sure that in spite of their age difference, Qasim will assume the duties of a husband in due time: "His three older sons were already married and now it was Qasim's turn. The boy was still a little young, but the offer was too good to pass up. To begin with, he had thought of marrying the girl himself. He had only one wife; but in a twinge of paternal

conscience, he decided to bestow the girl on *Qasim*. It was his first duty” (*The Bride* 8, original italics).

The irony is that Afshan, finally wedded to young Qasim, never comes to know how close she came to becoming his mother rather than his wife! Furthermore, the use of the word “bestow” in the above extract symbolizes not only the omnipotence that Qasim’s father has over Afshan’s body, but also reflects the indifferent manner in which he awards Afshan to his son, as if he was distributing some spoils of war. This ideological construction of women’s bodies resurfaces later on in the novel when Major Mushtaq muses on the fate of Zaitoon, who is about to be married by her father to a man from his tribe: “Mushtaq had been in the tribal regions long enough to be well acquainted with the marriage formalities. A wife was a symbol of status, the embodiment of a man’s honour and the focus of his role as provider. A valuable commodity indeed and dearly bought” (138).

Interestingly, in the Islamic society of Pakistan, the manner in which the institution has been constructed and practiced is against the laws laid down in Quran. The Quran decrees that the marriage of any woman cannot take place without her explicit consent, “O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will” (4-19). There have been incidents recorded in *hadith* where the Prophet (PBUH) nullified a marriage when women complained to him that they have been married against their will. Similarly, Quranic laws explicitly point out that at the time of marriage a man should give his wife a dower or gift, “And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, Take it and enjoy it with right good cheer” (4-4). Unlike the dowry of the bride price taken in Punjab or Koshistan, the dower that Islam orders husbands to give their wives only belongs to them and men cannot reclaim it, unless the wife is proved guilty of adultery. The irony is that most of the time women suffer because they are not aware of the rights given to them in Quran. Patriarchy chooses to propagate selective sections and orders from Quran and *hadith* that can benefit and help them to establish control over women. Other sections, which specifically talk about the rights of women or the duties of men, are conveniently ignored.

Later in the novel, Sidhwa once again returns to this objectification of women’s bodies, but this time it is in relation to a different character, who is situated within a different cultural context of Pakistan. Though Zaitoon, Qasim’s adopted daughter, was

born and raised in the plains of Punjab, when the time comes for her to be married, a similar fate awaits her, despite the difference in culture. Years later, Qasim has moved away from his tribe and settled in Lahore, a cosmopolitan city forming the heart of Punjab. He is visited by an old friend from his Kohistani tribe and once again in a completely male-to-male conversation, Qasim accepts the proposal of Sakhi's father for his daughter. The marriage of Zaitoon to Sakhi, a man from his tribe, is recognized by Qasim as a symbolic return to his roots, a price he is most willing to pay for having deserted his tribesmen in favour of city life: "It grieved him to leave her, but it had to be. Her marriage to Sakhi would consummate an old fervent longing. Through their children she would be one with his blood" (*The Bride* 166).

While finalizing Zaitoon's marriage, Qasim does not even for the briefest moment take into account the possibility that his daughter, who is used to the relatively easy-going and modern culture of Lahore, might become utterly miserable at being forced to adapt to a tribal lifestyle that is harsh and conservative. While making his decision, he does not see the need to consult with either his daughter or Miriam, Nikka's wife, the woman who has practically raised Zaitoon. The way Sidhwa portrays the entire scene of the discussion of Zaitoon's marriage is reflective of the bystander status that women like Zaitoon have in relation to the issue of their marriage. First we see Qasim and Sakhi's father engaged in a passionate conversation and, after the latter departs, this is followed by a heated argument between Qasim, Miriam and Nikka: "Nikka was talking to Qasim . . . They seemed to be arguing, and Qasim looked hard and cold . . . then a strange thing happened . . . Miriam, with only a chadar over her head instead of burkha, came out and sat down with men" (92). While these people are actively making decisions about her fate, Zaitoon stands in the window of her room looking at this scene below, her presence acknowledged only occasionally by the few glances that Miriam directs towards her, "Miriam glanced up and noticed Zaitoon's intent face at the balustrade" (93). The positioning of Zaitoon in this scene symbolically presents the status that culture confers upon her as a woman in relation to marriage; she is an outsider who is made to stand on the margins and watch everything happen to her as a distant, muted bystander, "Should she go down? She desperately wanted to discover what this was all about . . . she fidgeted, but stayed upstairs, waiting" (93).

Miriam vehemently protests against Qasim's decision to marry Zaitoon into an alien culture and, sarcastically referring to the tribal custom of the bride-price, remarks

that if Qasim is selling his daughter for money, she and her husband are willing to pay him more. It is interesting to note that in the end, as a desperate measure to keep Zaitoon from leaving her home, Miriam asks Qasim to wed Zaitoon to her husband, Nikka, who has been a father figure to her because of his close friendship with Qasim. This incident is not dissimilar from Afshan's marriage, when her future father-in-law entertained the thought of making her his wife: "Miriam felt the chill impact of his fury and an anguished stab of futility broke her voice. She continued in a crazed whisper. 'Why not marry her to my husband here? Yes, I'll welcome her, look after. We have no children and she'll be my daughter. She'll bear Nikka's daughters and sons'" (94). Though Miriam herself acknowledges the absurdity of her suggestion, South Asian readers of Sidhwa's fiction can find in this outburst echoes of a harsh social reality of their cultures: the marriages of young, even virginal, women to childless older men who, sometimes under the pressure of their families, but mostly motivated by the desire to have a son to carry on their lineage, marry more than once. As the following section will show, Sidhwa's novel depicts that once women are married, patriarchy uses religion, culture and nationalist forces to domesticate, control and exploit them.

### **3.2 *Zenana* and Honour- The Social Identity of Women**

Sidhwa's novel shows that the exploitation of women through the institution of marriage is facilitated, strengthened and even condoned by the ideological position that women are assigned within the larger social and cultural structure of Pakistani society. Her narrative exposes that patriarchy in Pakistan culturally manipulates the lives of women, first by gendering them into stereotypical roles constructed in terms of the anatomical make-up of their bodies and second, by branding their bodies as symbols of male honour, thus legitimizing and justifying their control and exploitation by men.

#### **3.2.1 *The World of Zenana***

Whether it is the tribal world of Kohistan or the urbanized society of Punjab, the Pakistani societal structure of Sidhwa's novel is characterised by a very clear, unmistakably visual and physical demarcation of space as male or female, public or private. The marking of these domains as masculine or feminine is significant as it symbolically reflects the gendered nature of the social roles of men and women. Like other patriarchal societies, Pakistani culture constructs an essentialist view of the

physiological and sexual differences in human beings. It postulates that men and women are two completely different entities who have been biologically ordained by nature to exercise their abilities in two different walks of life and thereby fulfil different social roles. *The Bride* depicts the gender segregation that characterizes Pakistani society is used by patriarchy to effectively control the sexuality of women:

Patriarchal hegemony is such that it does not rely on sexual violence alone to keep women in check. As feminists across the globe have demonstrated, one of the most successful ways in which women's sexuality was controlled and disciplined was confining them within home and interpellating them into predominantly subordinate and familial subject position such as daughter, sister, wife and mother. (Jayawardena and de-Alwis xix)

Pakistani patriarchal forces uses biological determinism to construct an image of the bodies of women predominantly as sites of reproduction and then gives men control over them in the role of their protectors, providers and owners. This gender construction helps to maintain patriarchal cultural hegemony because the public world of power, politics, money, change and agency is populated by men, while women remain cloistered inside their homes, the private spaces that have been designated for procreation and nurturing.

Before a child reaches puberty and starts displaying secondary sexual traits, male and female children are allowed to intermingle and play together, as depicted by Zaitoon's early childhood in the novel. As a five-year-old child we see her running about in the camp set up for migrants reaching Lahore, and later when Qasim settles down in his new house with Nikka and Miriam, we are told that "she played with the little urchins of her street" (*The Bride* 52). But as soon as Zaitoon starts menstruating, the eleven-year-old girl is told by Miriam that now she has become a woman and must not mingle with males, whether they are young boys or grown men: "You are now a woman. Don't play with boys—and don't allow any man to touch you" (55). Miriam's worry for Zaitoon seems to indicate that with the start of menstruation the teen or pre-teen female body is stripped of any semblance of innocence or youth, and within the symbolic social order it acquires the same signification that is attributed to the body of an adult woman. Similarly, Islamic theologians forbid the free mingling of the sexes and

an isolated meeting between an adult man and a woman for fear of moral corruption: “The presence of women in men’s space is considered highly dangerous for—as a popular *hadith*<sup>27</sup> states—whenever a man and a woman are alone, *Ash-Shaitan* (the Satan) is bound to be there” (Hassan, R. 3, original italics). Similarly seeing Zaitoon’s menstruation as the sign of her budding sexuality, Miriam tells her to stay away from men. Miriam’s concern for Zaitoon is not an instance of isolated, individual concern of a mother for her daughter, rather, it is indicative of the general disposition of Pakistani culture in which, much like the Brahmin world of *Water*, a female’s body becomes a source of stress and worry for her family as soon as menstruation begins, as with it the patriarchal culture starts objectifying a female as a sex object exhibiting a sexual ripeness that is ready for male impregnation, whether legitimate or forced: “If women are not constrained, then men are faced with an irresistible sexual attraction that inevitably leads to *fitna*<sup>28</sup> and chaos by driving them to illicit copulation” (Siddiqui qtd. in Jafri 74). Miriam’s thinking is, thus, symptomatic of the Pakistani male phobia about the female sexuality which sees a woman’s body as a potential threat to the order of the society.

According to Fatima Mernissi Muslim woman’s sexuality has been construed by Islamic theologians as a *fitna* which, if not controlled and restrained, can unleash extreme chaos, disruption, disintegration and moral corruption in society. Her body is the centre of a desire that is anti-social and anti-divine: “The woman is *fitna*, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential” (Mernissi 44). The male-dominated Islamised<sup>29</sup> society counters this threat by placing girls like Zaitoon and women like Miriam inside the four-walls of the home or the *chardewari*, and thus in *The Bride* we see that after menstruation begins, Zaitoon is forbidden to play in the streets or to go the school; she

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<sup>27</sup> The Hadith are the sayings of the Holy Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (PBUH) which constitute the secondary source of Islamic knowledge, teachings and principles.

<sup>28</sup> Fitna is a highly loaded term in Islamic theology that is used to refer to a number of things that can cause harm to the social order and can mislead a true believer. It is difficult to translate and equate it with a single word in English language due to its multiple connotations and denotations. A simple translation of fitna is the “forces that can unleash uncontrollable social chaos. Fitna partakes of the Dinoyesian” (Jafri 72). The parallel of the notion of women as fitna is the concept of the femme fatale that is known to the English speaking world, the temptress, the enchantress or the mysterious woman that lures men away by her beauty and power.

<sup>29</sup> I am choosing to call Muslim societies like that of Pakistan to be “Islamised” as they claim to practice Islam but it is usually in the form of selective circumspect choices which help one group/religious sect to use religion for its own political goals and social control.

is removed from the public sphere and is placed in the private and protected world inside the house. The spatial demarcation of society into private/public and the confinement of women inside the *chardewari* is, historically, an old withstanding tradition or custom in Muslim societies which is symbolic of the control men possess over the lives and bodies of women (Jafri 61). Mernissi argues that the desire to gender the space is born out of the male need to control the sexuality of women and constructs a whole system of social roles and positions which ensure the continuous subjugation of women as wives and mothers:

One of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim sexuality is its territoriality, which reflects a specific division of labour and a specific conception of society and power. The territoriality of Muslim sexuality sets patterns of ranks, tasks and authority. Spatially confined, women were taken care of materially by the men who possessed them, in exchange for total obedience and sexual and reproductive services. The whole system was organized so that the Muslim *ummah*<sup>30</sup> was actually a society of male citizens who possessed, among other things, the female half of population. (169)

The seclusion and sexualisation of a young girl like Zaitoon may seem harsh and cruel, but the reality of Miriam's fears about the sexual vulnerability of girls soon becomes apparent when readers are told about the pregnancy of a ten year old girl (*The Bride* 58). Ironically, patriarchally conditioned women like Miriam see in these incidents the affirmation of the logic of male protection and consequent female seclusion in the *zenana*. Zaitoon naively believes that the pregnancy must be miraculous as the girl was not married: "Zaitoon believed it was a miracle. For a while after that she yearned for the miracle to strike her as well" (58). In providing the child's perspective, Sidhwa contradicts Miriam's point-of-view, and thereby the male logic of female segregation. Zaitoon's remarks capture the sexual innocence of the females of her age and the whole pedophilic incident symbolically suggests that it is the male onlooker who is directly responsible for the reduction of a female body to a sex object. Also, it effectively shows that this sexualisation takes place essentially without any active involvement, whether

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<sup>30</sup> The worldwide community of Muslims

conscious or unconscious, of the female, thus proving, that the segregation of women does not always result in protecting her from male abuse and violence.

Once Miriam stops Zaitoon from going to school, she starts taking her on visits to the houses of neighbouring women. Zaitoon feels that “entering their dwellings was like stepping into gigantic wombs; the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies” (55). This step marks Zaitoon’s symbolic initiation into the private, feminine world of the *zenana*, the name given to the living quarters of females in Pakistani culture. The justification for the construction of the feminine world as a hub of procreation has been derived from religion. Just as in *Water* patriarchy exploited Hindu religious scriptures to justify the doctrine of biological essentialism, similarly, in Pakistan Quranic revelations are used by the patriarchy to obtain legitimacy for its hegemonic control of women’s bodies and the reductive construction of women’s social position as wives and mothers (Jafri 128-132). Drawing on the concept of *Qawaam* used in the Quran in *Surah Nisa*, Verse 43, traditionalist Islamic clergy argues that the gendering of women into domestic roles is according to Islamic principles and that within families the superiority of men over women is ordained by Allah. Men have been made the *Qawaam* or guardians of women to protect and look after them, while, the Muslim women have been ordered to guard their chastity inside their homes and to obey their *Qawaam* or guardians. According to Verse 43 of *Surah Nisa*: “Men have authority [*qawaama*] over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they [men] spend their wealth to maintain them [women]. Good women are obedient [*ta'a*]. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them” (Dawood 370).

Apparently this verse justifies male hegemonic control of women’s bodies and the gendering of their roles as wives and mothers. However, various Islamic scholars and Muslim feminists (An-Na'im 97; Engineer 46; Hassan, R.; Stowasser 108) contest the way this verse has been translated and interpreted. Riffat Hassan, for example, argues that the word *Qawaam* has not been used in an imperative mode in this verse which means that the verse does not declare that men should be guardians over women; if it was made imperative only then this order should be considered binding for all. Similarly, she points out that in the Arab context, being made a *qawaam* means to be given financial responsibility, which in the context of the verse was done to protect the pregnant or nursing mothers from the additional burden of managing finances while

looking after their children. Jafri draws attention to the act of translation of the verse, pointing out that no linguistic translation can claim to be entirely true to the original version and often “a seemingly harmless choice of words can change the spirit of the text” (129). He suggests that the process of translation itself is an interpretive act that is open to the influence of gender, education and ideological positioning of the translator. To prove his point he compares two translations of the same verse by two very famous figures Pickthall<sup>31</sup> and Maududi<sup>32</sup> (Maududi’s translation is placed in parentheses and italicised in the main text by Pickthall):

Men are in charge of women (*men are the managers of the affairs of women*), because Allah has made one of them to excel (*superior to*) the other, and because they spend (*men spend of their wealth on women*) of their property (*for the support of women*). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded (*Virtuous women are, therefore, obedient; they guard their rights carefully in their absence under the care and watch of Allah*). (130)

In the three translations, *qawaam* has been translated as “men having authority over women”, “men are in charge of women” and “men are the managers of the affairs of women”, each of which generates its own set of interpretations. Historically, men have, predominantly, been the interpreters, legislators, propagators and guardians of Islamic knowledge, therefore, it follows that Islamic principles have been used and manipulated by the patriarchy for its advantage, this verse being one point in case (Hassan, R.; Engineer). Nevertheless, the continuous propagation of the male interpretation of this verse continues to provide justification for the restriction of women inside the *chardewari* or *zenana* in Pakistani society:

Gender inequality is acknowledged and justified in religious terms on the grounds that God made men and women "essentially" different; that these differences contribute to different familial roles, rights and duties,

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<sup>31</sup> Marmaduke Pickthall was an English clergyman who had converted to Islam. His English translation of the Quran is considered, even today, to be one of the most authentic ones.

<sup>32</sup> Maulana (title of a religious scholar) Maududi is a very famous interpreter, translator, theologian, political activist and Muslim philosopher from Pakistan. He is well known for his ideas about the revival of Islam, and was one of the founding members of Jamat-e-Islami or Party of Islam, one of the main religious political parties of Pakistan.

which are complimentary; and that this complementarity is crucial to the cohesion and stability of the family and society. (Hajjar 7)

In her novel, Sidhwa includes details of the street where Qasim, Nikka and Miriam live to show that the division of space in terms of the public and the private, as well as the male and the female, is reflective of the social roles assigned to men and women as the providers and procreators/nurturers respectively: “The untidy row of buildings that crowded together along their street contained a claustrophobic warren of screened quarters. Rooms with windows 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” (*The Bride* 56). Sidhwa shows that the *zenana* is a world populated by women who know the meanings of their being or self, primarily, in terms of wifedom and motherhood. Sidhwa wrote this novel during the 1980s, which in the political history of Pakistan was a time of the restructuring of Pakistani society under the Islamisation of General Zia-ul-Haq. There was a significant rise in the power of the orthodox Islamic factions during his period, as General Zia exploited religion to win acceptance for his dictatorial rule. The traditionalist religious factions gained political leverage and dominance for the first time in the history of the country and this in turn had serious consequences for women, particularly for middle and lower class women. These factions popularized and reinforced the seclusion of women from public spaces; *purdah* (or veiling) was institutionalized at a national level and the concepts of *chadar* and *chardewari* (or veil and the four-walls of the house) became the definition of Pakistani womanhood; discriminating laws pertaining to sexual crimes (*The Haddood Ordinance*) were passed which made women vulnerable by giving men excuse to convict them on the slightest suspicion of sexual transgression; home was sanctified as a religious/nationalist barrier against intrusions of Western or modernist influences, while “the ideal of a woman as a caretaker of [this] home [community, society, nation]” (Ahmad 8) gained widespread approval in a culture that charged women with the duty “to preserve and protect their cultural heritage and pass it onto their children into their roles as mother and caretakers” (Jayawardena and de-Alwis xix). (For more details about Zia’s Islamisation and its consequences for Pakistani women see, Rouse “Gender”, “Shifting” and “Outsider”; Minhas; Jafri; Knudsen; Toor; Khan, S.).

Although women in contemporary Pakistan are increasingly becoming visible in the public sphere and are actively partaking in the economic, political, cultural and social development of the country, the idea of a woman who chooses not to marry or have children is still largely unacceptable. Most of the women who choose to step out of the house and work are expected to manage both home and job simultaneously (See Mirza; Weiss; Haeri). Moreover, the rise of Talibanisation, a latent effect of Zia's Islamisation, and the recent Western campaign of the "War on Terror" has added to the popularity of the religious orthodoxy which with ever-increasing force is demanding a return of *chadar* and *chardewari* for women. In the face of rising religious orthodoxy, it is not surprising to hear these demands to curb the freedom and mobility of the Pakistani women: "fundamentalism naturalises and sacralises the family and sexuality and secludes women from the public sphere. Fundamentalism uses women's bodies as a battlefield in its struggle to appropriate institutional power" (Jayawardena and de-Alwis ix).

In her novel, Sidhwa shows that inside the *zenana*, women are domesticated into thinking about themselves and other women as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. The world of middle class women, like Miriam, revolves around the notion of marriages and children; their discussions filled with concerns of mothers and/or a preoccupation with wifely duties and obligations. Closely knit and bound together by intricately woven female friendships and companionships, it is a sphere where men concede their authority and presence to women, who in the absence of male control enjoy freedom of action, movement and speech. In this feminine world, "Men, although favoured, were not especially welcome" (*The Bride* 56) and when they have to become a part of this feminized space; they sit "usually aloof and ill at ease" (ibid). When a house is visited by women of other families, men usually go outside the house or leave the surrounding areas as a mark of respect and/or to give them privacy.

Both Sadaf Ahmad and Shahnaz Rouse point out that in South Asia (India and Pakistan) the concept of *zenana* was romanticised during the struggle against British Imperial rule (Ahmad 5; Rouse "Gender" 50). This romanticisation of *zenana* as a safe haven for women in the nationalist political, religious and/or literary discourses was accompanied by a correlative eulogization of motherhood and the purity of women. Religious revitalisation was used as a powerful tool by nationalist forces during the early parts of the twentieth century to galvanize the public against the British. Chaste

women, mothers as fierce caretakers of traditions and the home as a sanctified sanctuary, free from the corrupt influences of the immoral, modernised, Western culture of the outsiders/invaders, formed the key images in the repertoire of the religious/nationalist forces to prove the moral and cultural superiority of the Indian culture: “Women were constructed as ‘Mothers of Nation’ and their biological roles as reproducer of the nation was highlighted. This instrumentalised women’s reproductive functions and their bodies in the interest of the State. The nationalist project . . . imposed a new agenda for women as cultural carriers of tradition” (Jayawardena and de-Alwis x).

While men struggled and competed against the colonizers in the public sphere, women were segregated, secluded inside their homes and turned into symbols of nationalist pride. The nationalist forces claimed that by remaining inside, the women fought half the battle, as they safeguarded the institution of the Indian nuclear family against the individualistic tendencies of the invaders: “there was consolation in the knowledge the real strength of the Islamic [Indian] social order lay in the stability of the family unit” (Jalal qtd. in Ahmad 6). Similarly, they performed a great service for their nation by instilling in their children a strong sense of cultural traditions and values of their forefathers, and particularly by proving the superiority of Indian culture through their chaste behaviour: “women are seen to be the repositories of tradition and their ‘inviolability’ has been a powerful tool of cultural defense against modernisation and westernization” (Jayawardena and de-Alwis xv). On one hand, in these discourses “family as key social institution and motherhood as women’s primary role” (ibid) was highlighted and sanctified, while on the other, the concepts of women's rights and the desire of women to leave the safety of *chardewari* became emblematic of Western coercive influence and a lack of moral values.

Literature was written, pamphlets were published, songs and sermons were recorded which hailed women as wives and mothers along with the image of home as a haven for them. Rouse points out that even after independence from the British, the emphasis on the preservation of the family unit for the stability and formation of a strong nation continued in Pakistani society and therefore, women, motherhood and *chardewari* became an integral feature of the newly independent state (“Gender” 59-62). The *zenana* presented by Sidhwa in her novel has been created in the socio-political historical context of Pakistan in the early years of its independence. What is significant

about Sidhwa's depiction of *zenana* is that she does not idealize it as a sanctuary for Pakistani women in her novel; her presentation of the *zenana* in *The Bride* is at odds with its traditional positive portrayal in the majority of patriarchal Pakistani Urdu and English literature. For example, *Mirat-ul-Uroos* or the "*Mirror of the Bride*" (1869), a very popular and canonical literary work in Urdu language by Deputy Nazeer Ahmed, presents wives and mothers, fiercely loyal, perfectly chaste and highly skilled in domestic and religious affairs, as the ideal Muslim women. A woman who is not well domesticated is portrayed as bringing harm, shame and ruin to her family as well as to society at large. *Mirat-ul-Uroos* was made into a hugely popular serial that was telecasted on Pakistan's National Television during the 60s. Both the drama and the book's message affirm the division of the society into public and domestic spheres for the creation and smooth working of a harmonised society. Similarly, *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali (1940) creates a picture of a colourful, glittering world of female intricacies where wives and mothers lovingly (and willingly) look after their male kin, who in turn protect them from economic pressures and the violence spilling in the streets of Delhi.

In contrast to these visions, Sidhwa shows that though Pakistani women may enjoy relative independence in the *zenana*, this liberty comes at its own price. For these women, *zenana* life is measured in terms of children being born and raised and for them the definition of their femininity is maternity:

Smells of urine, stale food and cooking hung in the unventilated air, churning slowly, room to room, permeating wood, brick and mortar. Generations of babies had wet mattresses, sofas and rugs, spilled milk, sherbets and food, and wiped hands on ragged curtains; and, just in case the smells should fade, armies of new-born infants went on arriving to ensure the odours were perpetuated. Redolent of an easy-going hospitality, the benign squalor in the women's quarters inexorably drew Zaitoon, as it did all its inmates, into the mindless, velvet vortex of the womb. (*The Bride* 56)

In Sidhwa's depiction words like "dim maze", "smells of urine", "stale food", "unventilated air", "ragged curtains", along with a permanence of various kinds of "odour" in the air, creates a picture of a world that is unhygienic, claustrophobic and

ugly. The most significant images appear in the last sentence of the above quoted extract where the people in the *zenana* are called “inmates” by Sidhwa. This penal metaphor suggests that even though the confinement of women to these quarters and their resignation to the roles of mothers and wives might have been taking place for centuries, its ubiquity is neither proof of the consent of women nor it is a symbol of the success of society. These essentialist roles and the gendering of space are forced upon women by men for the purpose of controlling their lives and particularly, for channelling their sexuality in a manner that is beneficial to them. Caught in the “mindless vortex of womb” with “armies of babies,” the lives of these women keep whirling in a never-ending cycle of restless nights and continuous nurturing which keeps them so preoccupied that they have little chance to reflect or question the pattern of their gendered existence. Furthermore, both “armies” and “mindless” may also signify that there is no place for intelligence or freewill even in this relatively autonomous world of females as they are not expected to make any significant decisions in their lives or in the lives of their children, which is often the case in Pakistani culture. Thus, the gendered construction of women’s bodies helps patriarchy to keep the system of male dominance, control and manipulation in place within culture and society.

Sidhwa’s fiction depicts another important reality in suggesting that men are not solely or always responsible for women’s oppression. Patriarchal values continue to be upheld because women like Miriam act as male accomplices and agents. Having internalized the patriarchal essentialist notions about human biology, they fail to see the constructed nature of the cultural roles assigned to men and women. They fail to realize that unlike the animal kingdom, which is founded on the appeasement of instincts, human society is structured by a complicated web of instincts and their control, where fulfilment, sublimation and substitution can be legitimate outcomes of a desire. For these women, procreation is not a question of choice, it is a finality of nature, a mark of their destiny or fate. When Qasim allows Zaitoon to go to school and study, Miriam sees this as an utter waste of Zaitoon’s time, as she sees no purpose of secular education in making Zaitoon a better wife or mother: “Miriam scandalized by such a foolish waste of girl’s time, at last told Nikka, ‘Now that she’s learned to read the Holy Quran. What will she do with more reading and writing-boil and drink it? She’s not going to become a baboo or an officer! No, Allah willing, she’ll get married and have children’” (52). Women like Carol, Hamida, Miriam, Afshan and others living in the *zenana* view

marriage not only as the highpoint in their lives but also construct it as an aspiring ideal for every young woman. The romanticization of marriage is usually accompanied by a high emphasis placed on the domestication of young girls, like Zaitoon, into the roles of mothers and wives.

The tone of Miriam's dialogue suggests that she does not see the remotest possibility of Zaitoon leaving the private familial world and crossing over into the public sphere of men. For Miriam the thought of an unmarried, single, childless Zaitoon seems not only scandalous, but also a kind of natural abomination. In her opinion, the right thing to be done is to train Zaitoon, like other girls of her age, to look after her house and family: "Poor child . . . Had she a mother she'd be learning to cook and sew . . . Does Bhai Qasim think he's rearing a boy?" (53). Sidhwa shows that a key purpose of the activities of *zenana* is to accomplish this domestication of girls, particularly after puberty. She dexterously familiarises her readers with the subtle and yet unmistakable mechanism which culturally comes into play inside the four walls of the female quarters to turn girls into complacent beings—the docile bodies of Foucault's theory of power. As soon as Zaitoon starts menstruating, Miriam stops her from going to school and starts preparing her for marriage, "from her Zaitoon learned to cook, sew, shop and keep her room tidy" (55). Next she introduces her to the intricacies of socializing and forming friendships with other females, young and old, of the neighbouring families that are equal to or slightly better in economic status than them. During these visits:

While Miriam settled crosslegged on a *charpoy*, sometimes taking over a friend's knitting or embroidery as they gossiped, sometimes helping a girl cut her *kurta* or *shalwar*, Zaitoon played with the children. . . . Often she helped the little girls feed and wash their younger brothers and sisters. . . . On summer evenings they spilled into the comparative cool of alleys, little girls burdened with even younger children. (57)

These women train young girls in the feminine skills of sewing, cooking, housekeeping and so on, while their actions provide the much needed role-models for these girls to unconsciously absorb and follow. In *zenana*, girls like Zaitoon seem to be naturally moulded into playing the role of mothers when they look after their younger siblings. Interestingly, this process takes place without exposing these young girls to any details about the sexual nature of marital relationships. This lack of information in turn is

helpful in the manipulation and control of the sexuality of these young females; what they do not know about their bodies and its impulses can be masked and hidden, furthermore, lack of knowledge is also thought to prevent a young woman from actively thinking about and exercising her sexuality.

### **3.2.2 Women and Male Honour**

*The Bride* shows that the segregation and confinement of women inside the *zenana* is necessitated by the manner in which the notions of male honour and shame are constructed within Pakistani patriarchy. A woman's identity in Pakistani culture is always configured in terms of a man; she is never merely *a woman*, in order to be recognized and named within the cultural discourse and imagination as an entity or being, she is always somebody's daughter, sister, wife or mother. Furthermore, the construction of womanhood in terms of the functions a woman's body performs for a man culturally positions her as a kind of instrument, vessel, cattle or piece of land to be owned and used by a man. Given this construction and positioning of women in Pakistani culture, it follows that the notion of male honour or shame becomes directly proportionate to the actions and/or the status of his female kin, his wife, sister, daughter and even mother. The body of a woman is looked at as a symbol of a man's honour - a blank space to be marked, codified and inscribed according to standards of respect or shame that have been conceived and theorized by men (for details, see Maris and Saharso 52-73, Baker et.al; Campbell J.; Derne; Dobash and Dobash; Kandiyoti; Hossian and Welchman 4-10; Ckaravarti, "Father"; Ortner: Schneider):

In all relationships, the most powerful weapon that men wield over women is the notion of 'honour'; prior to her marriage a woman, as a daughter, represents the 'honour' of her father, as sister the 'honour' of her brother, as the beloved the 'honour' of her lover. After marriage, as a wife, she symbolizes the 'honour' of her husband, as a daughter-in-law, the 'honour' of her father-in-law and as a mother she symbolizes the 'honour' of her sons. To protect and preserve the 'honour' of these relationships a woman goes from one sacrifice to another and is repeatedly decimated as a person. . . . Ultimately, she comes to signify the 'honour' of her race, her tribe, the land and the nation. Thus, when these male collectivities fight against each other, she is the one who must be sacrificed at the altar of male 'honour' . . . [T]he concept of women as

symbol of 'honour' makes them into mere signs in which the actual, flesh and blood woman disappears. (Hussain in Jafri 32)

The cultural predisposition of seeing women's bodies as sites of male honour appears unambiguously in several places in the novel. In the second section, when readers are given a glimpse of *zenana*, we are told of the absolute position of power men typically enjoy in a Pakistani household and the discretion they exercise when a woman from another family comes for a visit: "Proud husband, fathers and brothers, they were the providers. Zealous guardians of family honour and virtue, they sat, when in their homes, like pampered patriarchs, slightly aloof and ill at ease, withdrawing discreetly whenever the household was visited by unrelated women, which it often was" (56). The extract reflects the cultural character of Pakistani society, which places men in a position of moral and economic superiority, and in turn authorizes them to act as the moral benefactors of women, guarding their conduct zealously so that they may not shame the family by acting under the influence of what is often considered their weaker and fickle nature: "[I]n its essence the honour of men is the same as their women's chastity and survival of the family institution wholly depends on it" (Siddiqui in Jafri 66). Similarly, by leaving the house during visits of women outside their family, they give proof of their gallantry and chivalry. The use of adjective "pampered" indicates that male instruments of control are kept in place by women themselves who, conditioned by the patriarchal ideologies permeating their culture, not only to concede to the authoritative position of men, but also encourage them with their indulgent attitudes. At another point in the novel, when Major Mushtaq is talking with Carol, he points out the tribal code of honour by which the Kohistani people lived, referring to women's position as symbols of male honour as the reason behind the segregation of the sexes that Carol has observed among them:

Of course, you know only the sophisticated, those Pakistanis who have learnt to mix socially—but in these settlements a man may talk only with unmarriageable women - his mother, his sisters, aunts, and grandmothers—a tribesman's covetous look at the wrong clanswoman provokes a murderous feud. They instinctively lower their eyes, it's a mark of respect. (113)

Similarly, later on in the novel, Major Mushtaq refrains from voicing his reservations to Qasim about Zaitoon's ability to adjust to the tribal life, knowing full well that such remarks would be interpreted as personal insults in the tribal code of honour in which "A wife was a symbol of status, the embodiment of a man's honour" (138).

Just as Sidhwa contests the patriarchal romanticization of *zenana*, she similarly reveals the ugly truth masked by the nobility of eulogizing women as symbols of honour. Her fiction exemplifies how when this noble notion does not result in women being killed, raped or abused, it makes their lives unbearable by subjecting them to a suffocating control of their bodies and sexualities. The novel indicates that women like Carol and Zaitoon, who are motivated by some ancient, romantic chivalrous code of conduct, mistake the overprotective behavior of men as instances of their respect and gallantry, and end up having to pay a terrible price for this misjudgment. Furthermore, by casting the jealous behaviours of Farukh and Sakhi—the former supposedly educated and liberal, the latter bound by ancient codes of tribal honour—as mirror reflections of each other, Sidhwa highlights the fact that the persecution of women due to this doctrine of honour exists in all regions and socio-economic classes of Pakistan, with the difference occurring only in terms of the degree of intensity.

The notion of honour and honour-based male violence is neither new nor is it restricted to Pakistan. According to a report United Nations Organisation issued in 2000, approximately 50,000 women are murdered all around the world, each year, in the name of honour, though the actual number may be even higher (Knudsen 5). In Pakistan, the number of women murdered in the name of honour was reported to be around 1000 in 2004 (*ibid*), which according to the Human Rights Commission Report rose to 2000 in the years from 2005-08, and in 2009 there was a further escalation in these murders as 647 more cases were recorded (Zia-Ullah 10). The ratio of honour killings in Pakistan indicate that almost one fifth of the honour-killings taking place all around the world place occur in Pakistan alone. In the context of Pakistani society, honour is a highly loaded concept that takes its legitimacy from ancient tribal and communal customs on one hand, and patriarchal religious interpretation on the other. According to Are Knudsen, "In Pakistan honour is a multidimensional term that includes familial respect (*izzat*) and social prestige (*ghairat*). Honour can be described as a relation between a person's own feelings of self-worth and that of the peer-group ("honour group") to which he belongs" (3). In this sense, honour is a relational notion

which is bestowed upon an individual, community or tribe by other members of the society. Furthermore, it is not a permanent status and the individual/community/tribe has to continuously prove that he/they are worthy of it. If lost, it causes intense social humiliation and shame, along with feelings of defilement or pollution. To restore one's honour, one has to purify his name by publicly undoing the slighting and sullyng action, which is usually accomplished by abusing, violating and/or killing the perpetrator or source of shame.

In a patriarchal culture like Pakistan, where women are symbols of male honour, their bodies become, "vested with immense negative power because any misbehaviour on their part can bring shame and dishonour to the male members of a whole community, lineage, or family" (Kandiyoti 322). Citing John K. Campbell, Amir H. Jafri argues that as honour is always judged by others, in the case of a woman it is not the act itself that can turn behaviour into honourable or dishonourable; it is the perception of her actions in the eyes of the community that puts these labels on her (20-21). As depicted in Sidhwa's novel, this conceptualisation of honour in a male culture becomes lethal for women as they are beaten, verbally and physically abused and even murdered on the slightest excuse or suspicion of immodesty or misconduct. Though initially it was the suspicion of sexual transgression in the form of adultery or infidelity that triggered the wrath of honour-related violence or murder, gradually this notion has been expanded to include any and every form of female disobedience, whether it is a wife demanding divorce from an abusive husband or a girl not wanting to marry the person chosen by her family (Tauma-Sliman 181-198; Chakravarti, "Father" 308-331; Siddiqi, M. 282-307). In short, every instance of a woman's resistance justifies her punishment or death in the eyes of the orthodox elements of Pakistani society.

In *The Bride*, when Zaitoon tries to refuse her father's choice of a husband for her, Qasim threatens to kill her if she even thinks about dishonouring his name by failing to marry Sakhi: "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 . . . . You make me break my word, girl, and you cover my name with dung! Do you understand that? Do you?" (158). His own misgivings about Zaitoon's ability to survive in the tribal culture start nagging Qasim's mind before the marriage but he dismisses them and sacrifices the life and happiness of his own daughter for the honour of his word. Just as we saw in case of the customs of *swara* and *vani* in the last section, a woman's life in this

patriarchal society is dispensable, and Qasim's actions show that its worth is even less than the words of a man: "A man's property, wealth and all that is linked with these is the sum total of his honour value. A woman is also an object of value in tribal societies... Honour is, therefore, a male value derived and viewed against the index of a woman's body" (Shah qtd. in Jafri 66-67).

In the patriarchal world of *The Bride*, the most distinguishing sign of a good and honourable woman is the observance of *purdah* or *veiling*, whether it is done literally or symbolically. The degree of respect commanded by a woman in society is shown to be directly proportionate to the level of *purdah* she observes. Margot Badron (*Feminists* 14-16; "Vision", 11-12), Leila Ahmed (part 2) and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley ("Feminism" 522-529; "Reading" 15-21) argue that a significant reason due to which *purdah* or "veiling" became institutionalized among Arab Muslims by the beginning of nineteenth century was its construction as a symbol of social/cultural prestige. They point out that the rulers of Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad (749-1258) started the tradition of keeping women in harems, which by the first decade of nineteenth century had become firmly institutionalized among the elite and upper-middle class Arab Muslims. The seclusion of women inside harems and a strict observance of *purdah* whenever these women stepped outside of their houses/harems became a mark of respect. The building of separate living quarters for women or harems could only be practiced in Arab society by those who were wealthy and well-off. The lower or the struggling middle class families could not afford to keep their women confined inside the house, as they were a source of free labour and actively participated in sustaining their families, alongside the men. Thus, seclusion, segregation and veiling came to be recognized as a social symbol of wealth, power and prestige—the more strict the segregation was, the more honourable the family became socially. By the nineteenth century, the concept of *purdah* had moved beyond a simple physical veiling of the body and face, and encompassed the entire spectrum of a woman's conduct, that is, how she moved, talked, laughed, acted, behaved or conducted herself in the public domain. *Purdah*, apart from being a physical cloth covering a woman's body, came to symbolize a figurative or metaphorical veiling of a woman's character and personality. Thus, along with covering her body with the veil, the purity of a woman's character came to be signified first and foremost by her virginity and later by her fidelity to her husband. A woman's fastidiousness in observing *purdah* became a highly prized marker of a man's status and prestige, in other words, a patriarchally controlled expression of a woman's sexuality

became the cultural signifier of a man's honour. Although Mernissi's research, on which I draw here, was done in the context of the Middle Eastern Arab Muslim countries, the same holds true for the cultures of South Asian countries like Pakistan and India. In fact, in the South Asian societies, veiling has served the additional purpose of maintaining caste, ethnic or tribal purity. For example, various forms of *pardah* in South Asia have been particularly popular among women of Brahmin and Syed origins, both of which represent the highest and most respectable castes among the Hindus and Muslims respectively. In the novel, Miriam starts observing *pardah* when the economic status of her husband, Nikka, starts rising and he establishes himself as a politically influential person: "Despite the unsettled times Nikka's business prospered. He and Miriam shifted to three rooms in the ground floor of a tenement . . . . Miriam, reflecting her husband's rising status and respectability, took to observing strict *pardah*. She seldom ventured out without her veil" (51).

Next, Miriam starts befriending women of other well-off or respectable families in her neighbourhood. Her acceptance in these circles is a further affirmation of the improved status of her husband in local society. For women like Miriam, the wearing of a physical veil is to be accompanied by a symbolic veiling. To culturally and socially signify that they come from a respectable family or are wives/sisters/daughters/mothers of honourable men, women are supposed to veil themselves from the prying eyes and tongues of strangers by removing themselves, whether physically or by wearing a *pardah*, from all those situations which might bring them in contact with men other than their family members. This segregation can help in protecting the honour of their families by keeping other men at bay. Similarly, in situations where they do come in contact with men, they are to behave in a chaste and modest manner. As respectable women, they are expected not to be open, loud, explicit or forthcoming in their mannerism and behavior; they are not supposed to freely and spontaneously talk with strangers. In fact, it is best for them to lower their gaze and withdraw themselves without inviting any attention when in the presence of unknown men. In a society which does not fully condone the uninhibited mingling of men and women in any context, where even the most mundane discussion of sex related issues is considered to be taboo, the slightest of actions acquire sexual connotations and thus, a woman cannot lower her guard at anytime.

Unmarried women are to zealously guard their virginity and married women are expected to display fierce loyalty to their husbands. The loss of virginity to a man other than her husband, or sexual encounters out of wedlock are both morally, religiously and culturally interpreted as the worst form of defilement, shame and humiliation for a woman. These also incur and legitimize some of the worst punishments a woman might have to endure, ranging from verbal abuse and physical violence inside the house to public humiliation through divorce, and even murder. Thus, whether or not a woman observes *pardah* physically, the notion of honour necessitates figurative veiling for women of every class. Any refusal to fit in this mould quickly earns a woman the stigmatic labels of whore, a bad woman or seductress, which justifies her violation and abuse due to her supposedly promiscuous and licentious nature.

In *The Bride*, Sidhwa demonstrates that the reasons which motivate veiling and segregation in Pakistani culture are not dissimilar from those Mernissi (and other Arab critics referred to above) has described in relation to Middle Eastern countries. Her research suggests that veiling, physical or metaphorical, is practiced in Pakistani culture not because of some religious or moral fervour, but because it symbolizes social status, and even, more importantly, because “the protection of female virtue is [done] for the benefit of the male ego” (Khan 273). Sidhwa uses the characters of Carol and Zaitoon to problematise/exemplify the construction of the notion of honour as an instrument of male control that results in the disempowerment and persecution of women. She first introduces her readers to the elaborate code of honourable conduct which women in Pakistani culture are expected to abide by and then she unmasks its exploitative use by men.

The relatively relaxed and informal behavior of his American wife continuously gets on Farukh’s nerves because as a Pakistani man he is trained to interpret her actions as a sign of moral corruption. Every appearance at a social event, even in the liberal setting of Lahore’s elite class, results in Farukh fighting with Carol about his suspicions of infidelity: “I’m so ashamed of you! Displaying your honkey-tonk pedigree! You laugh too loudly. You touch men . . .’. ‘But they’re your friends . . . And what do you mean, touch men! I only . . .’. ‘Don’t you know if you *only* look a man in the eye it means he can have you?” (*The Bride* 108, original italics). A similar fate befalls Zaitoon when Sakhi catches her waving at an army jeep. Though the vehicle was too far away for anyone to notice Zaitoon’s gesture, for Sakhi, her proximity to the road, which

leads to the external world, against his wishes, is a small infidelity, a proof of her brazenness. If Carol is subjected to emotional and verbal abuse, Sakhi parallels Farukh's jealous rage by verbally and physically torturing Zaitoon:

A stone hit Zaitoon hard on her spine . . . Another stone hit her head . . . Sakhi seized her. He dragged her along the crag. 'You whore', he hissed. . . . He cleared his throat and spat full on her face. 'You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs . . . Waving at that shit-eating swine. You wanted him to stop and fuck you, didn't you!' Zaitoon stood in a cataleptic trance . . . Sakhi's face was bestial with anger. 'I will kill you, you lying slut!'... He aimed a swift kick between her legs, and she fell back. Sakhi kicked her again and again and the pain stabbed through her. She heard herself screaming. At last he lifted her inert body across his shoulders and carried her home. (186)

Zaitoon and Carol become the target of their husbands' wrath because, in the eyes of these two men, the women have shamed and dishonoured them by symbolically unveiling themselves in public. Zaitoon transgressed the sanctified private world of Sakhi's village, and being near the road placed her in the public world of other men. Similarly, for Farukh, Carol's relaxed manners attract attention, and while reserved demeanor would have drawn less attention to her presence in parties, her openness makes her more visible in the eyes of men. Brought up in a culture that believes that only prostitutes or mad women, who have no sense of honour, display themselves openly before the eyes of other men and that by "simply being exposed to a potentially lustful gaze they can be polluted" (Jafri 60). Both men resort to violence against women to restore control over the transgressive, shameful behaviour of their wives and to vindicate their honour.

Carol and Zaitoon, on the other hand, are mystified and bewildered by the accusations of infidelity by their husbands. Fed the romantic fantasies of men as chivalrous and gallant, they fail to understand the cause of their murderous anger and jealousy. Furthermore, Sidhwa shows that it is not merely the violation of the ethics of modesty that make men turn violent; in fact, the failure to comply with a command issued by a husband or father can also evoke a similar reaction in men. Pakistani culture is shown to be founded and working on a mechanism of social identification which

divides and socially positions women in terms of the good and the bad, suggesting that as a woman living in Pakistan one can occupy only either one of the two positions: the *gharelu aurat* (the domesticated woman) or the *bazaar aurat* (the whore), the *shareef aurat* (pious woman) or the *badchalan/aawara aurat* (a woman who wanders about without shame). Interestingly, in Urdu language some of the words used to define a woman as whore (like *aawara* or *bazaru*) have been taken from words which are used to refer to actions in the public sphere, for example, the word *awaargi* (for *aawara*) means to loiter around, and *bazaar* (root of *bazaru*) means market. Decency in women appears, then, confined to the home, while public spaces can only mean corruption.

A further example of the above is another word used for “prostitute:” *peshawar aurat*. The word *pेशa* in Urdu simply means “profession.” These constructions reflect the deep-rooted bias of Pakistani culture which creates predominantly negative constructions of those women who step out of their homes, making Pakistani woman a category that, “can only be invoked thorough a transgressive metaphor: thus, crossing the threshold [of home] can signify the transformation from daughter to citizen and from ‘good anonymous woman’ to ‘transgressive woman to *fitna*’” (Hussain qtd. in Jamal 129). This crossing over turns her status from being revered to despised, honoured to raped, pious to sullied, from a respectable person to a whore. Thus, respectable women are those who submit themselves to patriarchal control, willingly assume the roles of mothers and wives, remain confined to their homes and successfully execute duties delineated by their male kin. Patriarchal elucidations of religion serve to strengthen this bifurcation and provide moral justification for this positioning of women: “The continuation of patriarchy is the ultimate aim of Islamic legislation and ... the interweaving of traditional customs, mores and beliefs with religion obscures the sources of both the law and ethically defined or geographically specific frameworks outlining the parameters of a Muslim woman’s identity” (Shaheed qtd. in Minhas 67).

The cultural claims of patriarchy are further reinforced by religious views such as the one which holds that Allah has created men as the guardians, protectors and saviours of women due to the latter’s inherently weak nature, proven by the fall of man from Grace because Satan took advantage of a gullible Eve. The view that a man who, as a guardian/protector, successfully delineates his duties as a guardian or protector will be richly rewarded in Heavens is equally unhelpful. Domesticated or obedient women are traditionally glorified and romanticized as symbols of honour through the local

myths, indigenous folklores, literary creations, songs, television, films and other forms of cultural discourse. If a woman fails to be domesticated into a submissive wife or mother, it is interpreted as an insult to the masculinity of men, a mockery of male power. And as mentioned in the beginning of the discussion, the only way men know to avenge their honour and to protect their positions of authority is by subjecting women to verbal, emotional and physical violence.

Things as insignificant and immaterial as Zaitoon weeping publicly upon her father's departure, can evoke such response from men. The public display of Zaitoon's filial emotions earns scorn for Sakhi from his elder brother and other tribesmen, for whom Zaitoon's distress is a signal of her failure to accept her new role as Sakhi's wife, which in turn symbolises Sakhi's failure to establish his masculinity and authority. Insulted by their insinuations, Sakhi avenges his honour by severely thrashing the women of his household, his mother and wife, in public (*The Bride* 169-173). Similarly, when Sakhi's mother tries to stop him from beating their ox to death, he flies into a murderous rage and starts beating her with the same stick with which he was beating the animal, "I'll teach teach you . . . I'll teach you meddling women. You think you can make a fool of me? Do you?" (172). And when Zaitoon comes and tries to protect his mother, he turns his anger on her, shouting, "You are my woman! I'll teach you to obey me" (173). What is most disturbing in Sidhwa's narrative, more than the severity of the nature of violence itself, is the calm cultural acceptance of the notion of killing and murdering a woman in the name of male honour. Whether it is the sophisticated world of Lahore's elite class or the conservative culture of the rugged mountains of Koshistan, the murder of an innocent woman never acquires the same censure as that with which this patriarchal culture looks at the killing of an innocent man.

Just as men can barter away a woman's body at the time of her marriage, similarly, the ideology of honour, accompanied by their roles as guardians and proprietors, lets men get away with crimes committed against women. Jafri quotes the case of Samia Sarwar who was murdered in the chambers of her lawyer in Lahore in broad daylight in 1999 (1-3). Samia, mother of two, had filed for divorce from her husband, a doctor, on grounds of continuous physical abuse. After lodging her request, Samia was continuously pressured and threatened by her family to take back the petition and return home. Fearing the threat of violence from the men in her family, the Lahore Court issued an order, on the request of her lawyer, prohibiting them from making any

contact with her. On April 6, her mother came to see her in her lawyer's chamber and there Samia was murdered by her family driver in the name of honour. Due to the bold nature of the murder, Samia Sarwar's case drew a lot of attention from media and in politics. The orchestrators of the crime, the male members of her family, were never arrested in spite of protests from feminists and the progressive elements of the society. Ironically, Samia's lawyer and her supporters were condemned and even threatened for raising their voices against her murder "Many social commentators argued in the media that since the killing was in accordance with their [Samia belonged to a tribal family] tradition it could not be a crime" (2). A resolution was presented in the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan to condemn the killing of Samia Sarwar. The presentation of the resolution generated a political fiasco, in which some of the most notably liberal politicians (like Ilyas Bilour) strongly supported the actions of Samia's killers in name of upholding of tradition and honour, whereas her lawyer, along with her supporters, were condemned as Western coercive elements bent on destroying the tribal, "We have fought for human rights and civil liberties all our lives but wonder what sort of human rights are being claimed by these girls in jeans" (Bilour qtd, in Jamal 2). The resolution was never passed and Samia was sacrificed in name of tradition without any condemnation by the legislative or the political powers of the State. Samia's case is emblematic of Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony where the culture, along with the power of the State, colludes to establish and maintain the dominance of patriarchy.

The cultural acceptance of female violation in the name of honour is depicted by Sidhwa in her novel through the dialogues of Major Mushtaq, who in a matter-of-fact tone tells Carol that since Zaitoon has made the decision to run away from her husband, her murder is justified according to the honour codes:

'Don't worry, she'll probably be okay. If not, too bad. It happens all the time.' 'What do you mean, "happens all the time"?' 'Oh, women get killed for one reason or the other. . . . imagined insults, family honour, infidelity . . .' 'Imagined infidelity?' 'Mostly.' 'Whats the matter with men here? Why are they so insanely jealous?' 'Jealousy, my dear, is not a monopoly- it's pretty universal.' 'Chopping off woman's noses because of suspected infidelity isn't universal!' 'That is in Punjab. Here they kill the girl. They'd kill her [Zaitoon] there too . . . .' (*The Bride* 223)

By running away, a wife inflicts the worst possible shame on a man, her desertion is usually interpreted as a sign of her moral weakness and murder is culturally, though not legally, acknowledged as a fitting punishment for such women. For a reader familiar with South Asian culture, this kind of murder, which is also popularly known as *honour-killing*, is not a fictional phenomenon, rather it is a living reality of these patriarchal societies. Women like Zaitoon often appear in the media seeking justice and/or legal or social protection after running away from their fathers, brothers, male guardians or husbands because they were being married against their will or want to marry someone they claimed to love, or because of the constant physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse to which they have subjected. The fate of these women is often very bleak. They are usually accused of being sexually involved with other men and are murdered publicly by fathers, brothers, husbands, sons and even mothers. The accusation of sexual involvement creates moral, religious and cultural justification for the murder of such women. The men involved may have to go through legal prosecution, but culturally they are never stigmatized or punished as criminals, in fact their actions earn them respect for being brave enough to take action against their own flesh and blood. Pakistani society sympathises with these men with the understanding that though it was cruel and harsh, it had to be done, it was necessary to maintain the appropriate balance of things, to keep moral and social order.

Society's conspiratorial involvement in honour-killing is highlighted by Sidhwa in numerous ways in the last section of the novel. The casual tone and remarks made by both Farukh and Major Mushtaq are only two of its many factors. The volunteering of other men from Sakhi's tribe to accompany him on his hunt for Zaitoon, without him or his family having to asking for their help, and the elation felt by Sakhi's father when Major Mushtaq gave him his word that Zaitoon was dead, are some of the events in the novel that clearly reflect how the masculine notion of honour, proves fatal for women like Zaitoon, who try to resist the patriarchal control of their bodies and lives. In *The Bride*, the feminist perspective on the male construction of honour is captured through the voice of Hamida, the otherwise mute and complacent mother of Sakhi. The injustice and cruelty of hunting down a clearly innocent woman like Zaitoon, who was forced to run away by Sakhi's own violent conduct, at last shocks her into the realization of the heavy price that women are made to pay in the name of upholding a man's honour:

Hamida sat in the middle of the waiting women. . . . 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 . . . .The set faces of the men, their eyes burning with hate and a lust for revenge, their old make-shift guns forever loved and polished, the leather slings decorated with coloured bands and tassels, cherished even more for the men they killed. Men and Honour. And now the girl . . . Visions floated confusedly in her mind. She, who had been proud and valiant and wholeheartedly subservient to the ruthless code of her forebears, now loathed it with all her heart. (190-191)

Hamida's realization in the novel is paralleled by similar insights by Carol and Zaitoon. Both the brides come to see, as a result of their direct experiences, exposure and observation, that the elaborate system of female segregation and honour are basically instruments used by men to dominate and domesticate women and especially to exert control over the sexuality of women. The images of male gallantry and chivalry are mirages created to mask the cruelty of a patriarchal system in which men tend to value the life of a woman, no matter how dear to them, no more than a piece of property, easily sacrificed and dispensable for an abstract tag of honour.

Another significant angle offered by Sidhwa about the nature of male honour is that its practice and construction is highly deceitful and hypocritical. She shows that men, liberal or conservative, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, religious-minded or secular, have double standards when it comes to honouring a woman. Those very men who are ready to avenge the honour of their women by murdering, without a moment's hesitation or regret, anyone who dares to even glance in the direction of their sisters, wives, mothers or daughters, when before an unknown woman, do not hesitate to rape her or violate her in every possible manner. Through numerous events in the novel, Sidhwa foregrounds the point-of-view that men are trained and taught to honour only those women who belong to them, whether by virtue of being from the same family, tribe, community, ethnicity or nationality. *Other* women, those who travel outside the boundary of their house without a male guardian, or come from a different culture, are of a different faith or are not branded or brandished with a male name tag, are reduced

to the level of sex objects, the target of male lust, their whole beings dehumanized as mere bodies seen as breasts and/or vaginas.

This hypocrisy is brought into play early in the novel when Nikka proudly tries to impress Qasim with tales of his visits to the Hindu holy city of Benaras, where by posing as a Hindu priest he impregnated women of another faith with his seeds:

‘Every year I was summoned to Benares for Holy Spring Puja. Childless women flock to the temple to invoke Shiva’s pity and assistance; plump young things married to dotards. There is much chanting on mantras, burning of incense, distribution of sanctified sweets and drink; until the women get stupefied—quite stupefied. You can do what you like. The Brahmins have a good time. But you know those lentil-fattened Hindus, they don’t have much seed. I was paid handsomely but, I tell you, I had to work hard at being Shiv’ . . . .Qasim guffawed. . . . This was one up for the lusty meat-eaters. Identifying with Muslim virility, Qasim’s pride soared. (37-38)

This extract is ironic at multiple levels. Both Qasim and Nikka feel no qualms about violating other women, whereas, if something like this would happened to their wives they would not hesitate to kill the man responsible for it. Moreover, as Muslims, they feel pride at taking advantage of Hindu women, while historical evidence of the 1947 Partition has proven that in the reverse situation they would have satisfied their rage by killing Hindu men. The third ironic element comes in with the mentioning of the Brahmins. It is curious that of all the four Hindu castes Sidhwa has chosen to use them, perhaps as this increases the irony of their actions. As the earlier discussion on Hindu womanhood made, the Brahmins are known for their obsession with caste purity and for an extreme control over the sexuality of their women. A Brahmin woman cannot marry a man of a lower caste or of another religion without incurring damnation for generations to come. Sidhwa offers the paradoxical scenario where Brahmins, whose religious and cultural code would decree them to kill a man of a lower caste if he touched a Brahmin woman, annually rape and violate women without any religious, moral or social repercussions.

Later on in the novel when Qasim takes Zaitoon to his homeland in Kohistan, having fed her tales of the heroism and valour of his people, he is humiliated when

Koshistani men of his tribe stare and jeer at Zaitoon, who they see as an outsider or the other, because of her darker skin colour:

He [Qasim] scowled at the inquisitive tribals, and at the wrath of a man of their own lineage, they blinked in astonishment. 'We're only looking at the woman who came with the *jawan* from the plains,' one of them said apologetically in tribal dialect. 'She has not come with the *jawan*. She is my daughter!' hissed Qasim. 'I'll wrench out your tongues, you carrion. I'll gouge the swinish eyes from your shameless faces. . . .' His clawed gingers quivered. They dispersed rapidly, and he sat down, trembling quietly. (152)

The tribesmen are shamed into leaving but not because they were caught while indulging in some immoral activity or because it was ethically wrong to stare at a woman, they left for they had been humiliated themselves by looking unabashedly at a woman who was their own. But perhaps the most significant examples of this hypocrisy are the visit of Nikka and Qasim to Hera Mandi, the red light district of Lahore, and the rape of Zaitoon towards the end of the novel.

When Nikka gets paid after committing his first political murder, he takes Qasim along on a visit to Hera Mandi where they sit and enjoy the dancing and singing of the renowned courtesan Shehnaz. Their visit to Hera Mandi is described in detail by Sidhwa and it is steeped in irony. The same Nikka whose wife never forgets to step outside of her house without veiling herself, and Qasim, who even in his old age becomes filled with murderous rage when men stare at his daughter, sit in Hera Mandi feasting their eyes on the body of a woman who dances sensually before them. It becomes even more ironic and ugly when Nikka pays additional money to Shehnaz to striptease before the four men present in the room. As she begins to strip off her clothes, the frenzy of their emotions rises and in their lustful eyes feasting on her body she is progressively stripped of her identity and humanity and in the end remains before them just as a body, a mass of flesh and bones created by nature since ancient times for the arousal and appeasement of male desire:

The body barely reveals its ribs, its spine—it is draped in colour. Her flushed skin glows like molten, pliant copper, flaming in the pink haze that highlights the voluptuous flow of long dark thighs and the soft swell

of perfect breasts slightly swaying. Shadows accentuate the in-curving areas, the opulent hollows. While the feet move, her arms rise above her head stretching the body in all its marvellous perfection . . . .Bending, a soft breast touching one knee, she removes one *payal* . . . .Her feet twinkle, she sways unrestrained, while the black reptilian plait of her hair flays her body. She curves her back until the plait rests on the floor. She is bent back like a bow, her nipples smooth and firm as carved mahogany, gazing at the ceiling. (77-8)

Before this scene, Shehnaz is described as a graceful, yet sensual, dancer, but when she takes off her clothes, Sidhwa recreates her in the onlookers' minds as only the anatomical details of her body. Her description in terms of Shehnaz's various body parts, complete with their changing shapes and colour, shows how ruthlessly detailed the surveying eyes of men become when they gaze at the *other woman* in a male space that has been socially sanctioned for this.

Sidhwa narrates incidents like these to convey to the reader that while Pakistani culture uses religious precepts and moral maxims to control women and does not hesitate in decreeing extreme punishment for women if they fail to comply, it never questions the sexual promiscuity of a man. Visits to prostitutes, the keeping of mistresses, affairs and sexual relations outside of marriage are all not only acceptable for a man but almost always justified by society. While Pakistani men would kill their own women and justify it as honour-killing on the slightest suspicion of inappropriate behaviour or the expression of the desire to marry a man of their own choice, their sense of propriety and modesty, religious sanctity or even honour is never violated when they indulge themselves in all that they consider to be murderously wrong for women.

### **3.3 Sexual Repression and Women**

With *The Bride* Sidhwa has not only deconstructed the patriarchal instruments of men's control over women, but she has also quite successfully drawn the curtain on the inverse consequences that permeate the cultural fabric of Pakistani society as a result of their use. In her fiction, Sidhwa seems to advance the view that, although the segregation of men and women in the Pakistani culture is meant to control the exercise and expressions of sexuality, ironically this forceful and at times unnecessary division

ends up creating the opposite effect. The hiding of women behind *purdah* and their restriction to the home results in making every encounter between men and women, no matter how brief, supercharged with eroticism and sensuality. The allure of women for men instead of being mitigated is multiplied; the hidden and inaccessible, the bodies of women appear more mysterious, while the challenge to possess them becomes more lucrative and attractive. The notion of looking at this veiled, mysterious creature (the woman), who holds promises of infinite riches and pleasures, is quite a common construct in popular cultural discourse, such as popular music or film. The song that Shehnaz sings before Nikka and Qasim reflects the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the desirability of a woman and the mysteriousness of her body that is built into Pakistani cultural discourse:

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 a 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/ . . . Man worships me—Angels have bowed their  
 heads/ If my *purdah* is removed—my mystery is betrayed/ Allah  
 forbid!—Allaaaah—forbid! (73)

In Sidhwa's words, a constant, obsessive concern with sexuality in general and about women in particular, creates in the culture of Pakistan an atmosphere of "repressed sexuality" (111). This atmosphere makes a woman who is unveiled or accesses men as a colleague, teacher or neighbour, a quick and easy centre of male attention and yearning. Coming from a different culture Carol did not, at first, realise that the true reason for all the attention that was lavished on her in Pakistan was this lack or repression. Later she comes to understand this:

She realized her casual American ways here, in a country where few women were seen unveiled, made her youth and striking looks an immediate challenge. She got more than her share of attention—more than any woman ought! She knew Farukh was right when he said: 'These goddamned men even fall in love with holes in trees! Don't let it flatter you'. (176)

The actions of characters in Sidhwa's narrative indicate that this sexual repression has changed the symbolism of eroticism and sexual encounters in the culture of Pakistan. In a culture where due to veiling the physically visible part of a woman's body is mostly her eyes, and the fact that men are not permitted any physical access to women, the eyes become eroticized into *the* erogenous zone for men. And consequently, using only their gaze, men can go through all the steps associated with sexual coupling, from a loving caress to the forceful violation of her sexuality. The relationship between a gaze and its erotic cultural symbolism is unambiguously presented in the novel when Farukh's tells Carol not to look into the eyes of other men, "Don't you know if you only look at a man in the eye it means he can have you?" "That's ridiculous! I don't believe you." "Don't you? You looked at me, and you got laid" (109). Similarly, later on Major Mushtaq tells Carol that when tribal men look at a woman from their clan they lower their gaze, but while looking at the *other women* their gaze becomes completely erotic, "They instinctively lower their eyes, it's a mark of respect. But let them spy an outsider and they go berserk in an orgy of sight-seeing! Don't take it personally. Any woman, whether from the Punjab or from America, evokes the same attention" (113). Thus, a man does not always have to touch a woman to make her feel sexually vulnerable or desirable and both responses can be accomplished through the male gaze. Sidhwa also shows that this erotic male gaze can be reciprocal, and women may use it to signal the attraction they feel for men. For example, Zaitoon, unaware of the symbolic meanings of the gesture itself, actively tries to copy sensuous eye movements from ~~the~~ actresses in the movies in front of Miriam and Qasim. As she is not an object of desire for either of them, Farukh's claim that a woman could "get laid" by doing so is never realized. However, when she is not within the safety of her father's home, Farukh's claim appears to be true: when she momentarily looks into the eyes of Sakhi for the first time and he feels that she has completely unveiled all of the sensuality and eroticism of her nature in that one look. As women in Pakistani culture are trained to assume the role of passive sexual partners and are not expected to be vocal in the expression of their desires as a sign of modesty, more often than not they are the objects of this gaze instead of being the gazing subjects.

Sidhwa has highlighted the different effects of this erotic male gaze on women in her novel. For example, this gaze could be non-threatening and gentle, making its

object feel appreciated. Carol becomes the object of this gaze after a few days of her arrival at the army camp during her conversation with Major Mushtaq:

She stretched her legs and arms and threw back her head. Her sweater rode up to reveal a slip of firm white stomach. Mushtaq turned a little. Smug behind his dark glasses, he gazed obliquely at the tidy fork between her trousers. . . . Languidly, she moved her long, trousered legs further apart . . . she knew the direction of Major's eyes and was warmed by an exultant female confidence. (110)

Another example of a non-threatening gaze is Ashiq's apprehension of Zaitoon when he meets her at the army camp. The non-objectifying nature of this gaze is reflected by the terms in which it constructs Zaitoon, it takes account of the sensuousness in her eyes, but this is immediately followed by references to her childish shoes and her agile, alert nature with a hint of defiance. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the extremely objectifying male gaze which dehumanizes a woman's existence into an ancient, identity-less source of sexual gratification. Carol feels its humiliation and terror when she finds herself exposed to the gaze of some Kohistani tribesmen who witness her flirting with Major Mushtaq near the river: "The tribal's eyes shifted and skewered the woman in ruthless speculation. For the first time Carol knew the dizzy, humiliating slap of pure terror. The obscene stare stripped her of her identity. She was a cow, a female monkey, a gender opposed to that of the man – charmless, faceless, and exploitable" (120). What Carol is made to suffer and experience here as a kind of visual rape is similar to what Zaitoon goes through in its literal, physical form towards the end of the novel. Both violations take place in the same geographical terrain of Kohistan; two men just like the gazing two eyes in Carol's situation take advantage of a weak and vulnerable Zaitoon. The deliberately evoked similarities are unmistakable and clearly indicate that in Pakistani patriarchal society women will always remain vulnerable and at the mercy of men, unless the societal attitudes change and the body, existence and role of women are conceived in different terms.

### **3.4 Feminist Awakenings**

The women in *The Bride* can be grouped together into roughly two groups. There are women like Hamida, Carol and Zaitoon who in one way or another defy,

resist or question the traditions, norms and ideologies of Pakistan's patriarchal culture. Then there are women like Miriam, Afshan, the young and old women of Hamida's tribe, who have internalized the essentialist view of women's bodies along with all its trappings and in doing so act as the agents of patriarchal power and help in the continuation of the cycle of oppression.

The character Carol, in the sub-plot, acts as a foil for Zaitoon, the protagonist of the main plot. Both women are shown to have been raised on romanticized myths, created by their respective cultures, about men and their treatment of women. While Carol represents a relatively mature, confident, vocal and sexually experienced woman; Zaitoon stands for the younger and rather naïve version. When they come across each other for the first time at the army camp Carol feels an uncanny connection with Zaitoon, though they come from different cultures, races, religions, and ethnicities and do not speak a common language. Yet—Carol sees Zaitoon as her reflection. Similarly, toward the end of the novel, Zaitoon experiences the same kind of empathy for a mad woman from Lahore, and having being driven to madness herself after being raped she realizes that the woman was a victim of the same trauma. Having suffered humiliation and violence at the hands of men in their lives and in the society around them, Carol, Zaitoon and Hamida form empathetic relationships not only with each other but also with other women. These empathetic relationships serve to raise feminist consciousness in these women, giving them the strength to challenge and/or defy patriarchy and at the same time it also helps them to survive in extremely oppressive circumstances.

Carol's little escapade with the tribals, Farukh's jealousy and her affair with Major Mushtaq slowly chip away at her complacent acceptance of and resignation to the patriarchal cultural values of Pakistani society. But the final nail in the coffin of her old self proves to be Farukh's reaction when she discovers the head of a young Kohistani woman floating in the river in Kohistan. While Carol is frozen in horror trying to make sense of the gruesomeness and cruelty of the people who had chopped off her head and had not even bothered to give her a decent burial, Farukh's calm and almost casual reaction is that the girl must have "asked for it" (225). This reaction mirrors the general pattern of thought in Pakistani culture which makes men the proprietors of women's bodies and legitimizes the way they are treated or disposed of. But what is most damaging is the inclination to objectify the bodies of women as sex objects, which consequently creates a mindset that blames the victim for the crime that has been

committed against her. Common cultural idioms like *hansi to phansi*<sup>33</sup> (if you laugh before men you will get laid) or *ghori hinhinati ha to ghora hinhinata ha* (the male horse whinnies in response to the whinnying of the female horse) reflect the beliefs that if a man is attracted to a woman, makes advances towards her and even rapes her, it is because she must have encouraged him with her behaviour. If a woman does not observe *purdah*, moves in society without a male guardian, freely converses with other men, dresses attractively, she is thought to be flaunting her body to men and inviting abuse, in other words she is “asking for it”.

Farukh’s words jolt Carol out of her complacency and make her comprehend that the tendency to blame women for the sexual aggression men have towards them is universal and all around the world women are raped, abused and bullied, their persecution blamed on the weakness of their constitution, gullibility of nature and the sensuality of their bodies: “Carol meanwhile lay in her room staring into the dark. . . . ‘Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten-up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature’” (226). The exhibition and acceptance of cruelty scattered around her makes her realize that if she stays there any longer she will be suffocated and so, she decides to leave Farukh and go back to the United States.

Sakhi’s violent beatings give Zaitoon the courage to break free from the tyranny of her husband’s control. Sidhwa shows that both Carol and Zaitoon defy the control of the men in their lives and gain a certain level of agency for themselves. However, it is clear that their actions are motivated more by what Sidhwa herself calls “instincts of self-preservation” than some strong or clear notions of a feminist defiance (176). Their level of engagement with patriarchal ideologies is also reflective of Sidhwa’s own stance as a woman writer. *The Bride*, as her first novel, is also reflective of the writer’s own feminist awakenings. The Kohistani girl whose story she had come to know during her honeymoon had been a forgotten, muted, nameless face buried under the rubble of Pakistani patriarchal social structure, another unmourned addition in the long list of women sacrificed in the name of (male) honour, but Sidhwa’s decision to write a story about her gives this victim a voice that questions the honour, dignity and humanity of her persecutors from the grave. By writing about honour killings, prostitution and the

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<sup>33</sup> Also quoted in Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India* (1988)

rape of a woman in her novel, Sidhwa takes a feminist stance to break the criminal silence that surrounds such murders and killings in Pakistan by making them a part of public discourse. Sidhwa's *The Bride*, though at times crude and not highly revolutionary in its engagement, nevertheless marks the beginning of a feminist tradition in the history of Pakistani literature written in English. This new tradition presents, within a specific temporal and spatial context, an insider's view of the subjectivities, lives and sexualities of Pakistani women.

## Conclusion

*I am not that woman selling socks and shoes*

*I am the one you needed to bury alive  
To feel fearless as the wind again  
For you never knew  
That stones can never suppress a voice.*

*I am the one you hid beneath  
The weight of traditions  
For you never knew  
That light can never fear pitch darkness.*

*I am the one from whose lap you picked flowers  
And then poured flames and thorns instead  
For you never knew  
That chains cannot hide the fragrance of flowers.*

*In the name of modesty  
You bought and sold me*

.....

*I am the one you gave away in marriage  
So you could be rid of me  
For you never knew  
That a nation cannot emerge if the mind is enslaved.*

*For a long time you have profited by my shyness and modesty  
Traded so well on my motherhood and fidelity,  
Now the season for flowers to bloom in our laps and minds is here.*

*Semi-naked on the posters –  
I am not that woman – selling socks and shoes.*

(Kishwar Naheed “Who Am I” translated by Rukhsana Ahmed)

I have chosen to open this conclusion with Kishwar Naheed’s poem because her poetry, like Sidhwa’s novels, is symptomatic of what can be called the first wave of feminist thought in Pakistani literature in the post-independence 1980s era. Kishwar’s poetry, along with Sidhwa’s novels, is emblematic of some of the finest works produced by women writers in Urdu and English language respectively. “Who am I” and Sidhwa’s novels under discussion, *The Bride* and *Water*, have several things in common: firstly, both writers had firsthand experience of witnessing the horrors of the 1947 partition and their works display consciousness of what Menon and Bhasin describe as the symbolic annihilation, abduction and suffering of women on both sides of the Indian and Pakistani border (212). Both women’s works are the product of the socio-political ethos

of a very critical moment in Pakistan's history, when Pakistani society fell hostage to General Zia's religious conservatism, extreme censorship on freedom of expression and marginalisation of an already underprivileged group of Pakistani women during the 1980s. Most important of all, the works of both writers (as is evident from the above extract and my previous discussion of the novels) are the result of a feminist consciousness that arises from the experiences of being what Spivak and Mohanty call the woman of colour, the subaltern woman or the third-world woman<sup>34</sup>. While the works of both writers display a critical awareness of the religious, political, economic and socio-cultural factors that bind and oppress the women of Pakistan, at the same time these writers refrain from positing the subjects of their writings as mere passive and voiceless victims of a patriarchal society. Both women writers raise their voice against the exploitation of Pakistani women in the name of traditions, the eroticisation of their bodies under a male gaze and the objectification and exploitation of women in and through marriage. More interestingly, both these women have displayed a consistent commitment to comment or write about the socially and culturally taboo topics of female sexuality and desire in their works.

In *The Bride and Water*, Sidhwa has highlighted the role played by religion and social institutions like marriage, along with cultural customs and traditions, in establishing and sustaining male hegemonic control over the bodies, subjectivities, sexualities and lives of South Asian [read Pakistani and Indian] women. It must be stressed that the South Asian characters that Sidhwa creates in her novels do not imply an essentialist, monolithic and homogenous category of South Asian womanhood; rather the characters in her novels are women located at particular junctures of time, place and class. Temporally, *Water's* story unfolds in the background of a pre-independence Indian subcontinent when an anti-colonial, nationalist political movement was on the rise during the 1930s. *The Bride* starts with events immediately preceding the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan and takes us through the riots of partition and the majority of its action unfurls in the backdrop of the newly independent state of Pakistan. The women in *Water* are Brahmin widows and wives belonging to the highest caste echelon of Hindu society, while the characters in *The Bride* are taken from a rising lower-middle class and elitist group in Pakistan. Spatially, *Water's* action takes place in

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25. For details see: Mohanty, et.al *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* and Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

a holy city in North India, whereas in *The Bride* the story moves between the Northern tribal culture of Kohistan and the urbanised culture of Lahore, Punjab. In spite of significant differences in class, religion, geography and time the women in both novels share in common their experiences of patriarchal hegemony. The commonalities or resemblances found in the experiences of these characters are important because they are reflective of Sidhwa's own feminist consciousness or standpoint. Sidhwa appears to be depicting three key things about women in South Asia in *Water* and *The Bride*: firstly, she shows that the subjugation of women arises from male fear of women's sexual agency and hence the social, religious, cultural and moral systems in the South Asian societies have been constructed in such a manner that they ensure and protect male hegemonic control of women's bodies. Secondly, Sidhwa depicts that by making marriage normative and prescriptive for women, patriarchy is not only able to successfully control women's bodies but also to ensure the subservience of these women through a domestication of their bodies. Thirdly, Sidhwa highlights that the construction of women as symbols of the honour of a man/family/nation makes women vulnerable to male exploitation and especially sexual abuse, inside and outside marriage.

Sidhwa's novels point out that whether it is in pre-independence Hindu society of the Indian sub-continent or the post-independence culture of Pakistan, an autonomous woman in charge of her own sexuality is conceived as the biggest threat to the socio-religious order. Thus, it comes as no surprise that most of the precepts concerning the construction of femininity in South Asia are in reality about the effective control of this sexual agency or "erotic autonomy" (Alexander 63) of women. In his *History of Sexuality* Foucault theorises sexuality to be "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power . . . one endowed with the greatest instrumentality" (103). His ideas have been modulated by feminists like Gayle Rubin who postulate that within patriarchal societies the sexuality of women becomes the transmitting point of male hegemonic control and that the oppression of woman is "borne by, mediated through, and constricted within sexuality" (qtd. in Jayawardena xvii). In the context of South Asia (Pakistan and India) the vastly varied studies of South Asian societies undertaken from legal, sociological, historical, anthropological, health care, psychological, religious and cultural angles confirm the findings of both Foucault and Gayle by foregrounding the correlative nature of patriarchal power and women's sexuality (For details see,

Ahmad; Jamal; Alexander; Jafri; Niaz; Dasgupta; Mazumdar; Bhasin and Menon; Jeyawardena and de-Alwis; Wadley). These studies claim that, “In traditional South Asian societies, patriarchal authority and control of female sexuality are important values related to the construction of masculinity and femininity and are often interpreted within such a framework by major social, economic, political and legal institutions” (Abraham 595). Both *Water* and *The Bride* show that religion has been instrumental in establishing not only the negativity of female sexuality but also in justifying its control and exploitation by men. At the risk of repeating myself, The Laws of Manu or the Dharmashastras in Hinduism argue that being born a woman is the result of bad *karma* and that women, being incarnations of *Prakriti*, are plagued by a hyper-sexual, innate demonic predisposition that they inherit from their mothers and thus cannot be trusted with their sexual autonomy. Similarly, the Islamised declaration of women as *fitna* along with mass circulation of Quranic verses such as "your wives are ploughing fields for you; go to your field when and as you like" (2-223), and “As for those [women] from whom you fear disobedience [*nushaz*], admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Allah is high, supreme” (4-34), give men unbridled and an almost uncontrolled access to women’s bodies and sexualities. These patriarchal interpretations of religion led men like Sakhi in *The Bride* to see Zaitoon as “his cunt” (162), while allowing Narayan’s Brahmin father and Sadananda, the temple priest, in *Water* to sexually exploit widows, keep mistresses and indulge in prostitution (78,156, 173-174).

The respective Hindu and Islamic negative constructions of female sexuality in South Asia have been further supplemented, historically, by the teachings of Christian missionaries and Buddhist monks. In traditional Buddhism, women are seen as a hindrance in reaching nirvana or spiritual enlightenment, a thought which is reiterated by Somnath in *Water* when he thinks of women as a snare that keeps Brahmin men like him from reaching spiritual heights (8). Similarly, the concept of the fall of Man with Eve as the reason behind it has been absorbed into Islam from Christianity. Sidhwa’s novels show that these religious interpretations construct a model of femininity in South Asia which identifies and defines womanhood in terms of docility, subservience, domesticity, reproduction, nurturance, purity and chastity: “there is a general tendency in mainstream South Asian cultures to primarily construct femininity in terms of submissiveness, inferiority, self-sacrifice, nurturing, good moral values, docile

demeanor, social dependency, and chastity” (Abraham 596). Moreover, within these same models a woman exercising and asserting her sexuality is predominantly negatively construed as a wonton, evil, seductress. South Asian masculinity, on the other hand, as exemplified by the characters of Sakhi, Nikka and Farukh in *The Bride*, is characterised as meaning sexual virility, physical strength, ability to mark and defend one’s territory but, more importantly, to have complete control over women’s bodies: “Masculinity in mainstream South Asian cultures is defined to a large degree in terms of men’s power, virility, and ability to control women’s morality and sexuality” (Abraham 598). Both *The Bride* and *Water* expose the double standards of sexual morality in South Asian cultures, which expect women to be modest, exhibiting control and discretion in the exercise of their sexuality, while the commonplace social acceptance of ‘*men have needs*’ ideology allows men to commit adultery and infidelity by having pre-marital and extra-marital relationships: “South Asian men are socialised to have expectations of their sexual needs and assumptions of female accessibility that justify forcing sexual access . . . [T]his sexual access is supported by legal, religious and social definitions of women as male property and sex as part of the obligations for exchange for goods” (ibid).

Sherry B. Ortner sheds light on another cause behind the intense control of female sexuality in societies like those of South Asia. According to her, the strict control of female sexuality in agriculture-based societies like India and Pakistan is the product of a social structure in which one’s right to claim inheritance is contingent upon establishing one’s self as a legitimate and lawful heir. Furthermore, in a Hindu society which is bifurcated and hierarchically structured on the basis of a caste system, the lack of a stringent control on female sexuality makes the purity of a caste vulnerable to pollution through the impregnation of a high caste woman by a low caste man (Chakravarti, “Gender”). The erotic autonomy of a woman resulting in her sexual transgression, thus not only mars the chances of a man’s lawful inheritance, but can also result in shaming or tarnishing of the honour of the man, his family, tribe, community and even the entire nation (Ortner; Jamal; Jafri; Menon and Bhasin; Abraham). This association of women’s sexuality with inheritance and caste purity led to the popularisation of child marriages in pre-independence India, along with a corresponding prohibition on the remarriage of a Brahmin widow as has been depicted by Sidhwa in *Water* through the examples of Kalyani, Chuyia, Madhumati and Shakuntala. Sidhwa

shows that a similar obsession with women's purity in the Pakistani society of *The Bride* resulted in the institutionalisation of the practice of veiling and the preferred seclusion of women inside the *zenana*. Commenting on the centrality of female sexuality and its moral regulation as a core feature of South Asian societies, Jayawerdena and de-Alwis point out:

Ironically, the common denominator that cuts across all communities, and often classes as well in South Asia, remains notions of female modesty. The sexual and moral codes imposed on women, codified and disseminated through hegemonic patriarchal institutions and instruments such as the State, law, religious tenets and their interpreters, the schools, the family, etc, share many similarities, despite their being categorised as Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and so on. (xvii)

*Water* and *The Bride* demonstrate that the South Asian patriarchy effectively controls and channels the sexuality of a woman for its own benefits by using the physiological construction of her body to justify her reductive gendering into the role of a wife and mother. Sidhwa's fiction offers clear examples which show that through a negative construction of women's sexuality, marriage becomes imperative for women in both India and the Islamised society of Pakistan. Commenting on the structure of Indian society, critics like Kakar, Kishwar Nabar, Bagchi, Ramanathan and Chakravarti point out that even today in contemporary India, womanhood is largely associated with wifehood and motherhood, and for the majority of Indian women "Biology is destiny . . . and femininity is maternity" (Ee-Jia 370). Similarly, quoting Cook, Abraham points out that the cultural, religious and political discourses in Pakistan augment each other to create an image of a woman whose purpose of existence is "to nurture, socialize, and sacrifice" (616) as a wife and mother for the greater good of the family, society and the nation.

Sidhwa depicts in her novels that culturally a South Asia woman is predominantly seen as a guest in her natal family while her true calling is to fulfil the role of a wife and mother. Idiomatic expressions such as *auraat ka asali gher uskay shohar ka gher hota ha* (the true home of a woman is her husband's house), *mera gher meri janaat* (my home is my paradise) along with the instruction given to the newly wed *ab is gher say tera janaza nikalna chahyee ya arthi uthni chayee* (after entering your

husband's home you should only come back to us if you are dead), all populate the indigenous imagination, languages and literature of South Asia. Even some of the famous songs that are sung locally in marriage ceremonies reflect this construction, for example, *assan chiryaan da chamba waey/babul asi udd ajana/sadi lambi udari aey/babul asan murr nai ana* (O father we girls are like flock of birds, we are going to fly away one day, we are going to journey far away from you and we are not going to return). These songs, anecdotes, idioms and expressions build marriage as the sole purpose of a woman's life and ensure her domestication or complete subservience to her husband by indicating that after being married the woman completely belongs to her husband. Through the characters of Afshan and Zaitoon in *The Bride* and those of Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala in *Water*, Sidhwa points out that marriages in South Asia are practiced as social contracts, which are usually formulated between the patriarchal heads of the family of the bride and the bridegroom. The bride, and in some cases the groom as well, possess little or no authority in the choice of their life-partner and mostly these choices are governed by (her father's or male guardian's) consideration of financial gain or rise in socio-political status in society. The body of the woman is predominantly reduced to an object or commodity that is exchanged between men. The socio-religious construction of male superiority and demonisation of female sexuality results in marriage as a social institution in which "men have historically had more power than women have" (Abraham 591). Sidhwa has shown in her novels, through the characters of Zaitoon, Hamida and the widows of the Rawalpur *ashram*, that within this asymmetrical marital relationship, the abuse of women, ranging from marital rape to verbal insults, is usually tolerated and accepted by cultural, religious, social and national institutions (like judiciary) in the name of tradition, a husband's right to correct a transgressive wife, the sanctity of a family, or the economic dependency of women on men (Dobash and Dobash; Abraham; Thapan; Maynard; Jafri).

Moreover, the South Asian ideology of *chadar* or *char dewari* (veil and four walls of the house) that genders society in terms of men/public and women/private, makes the issue of how a husband treats his wife or other female kin under his guardianship a private and not a public affair. A very common public response to the issue of marital abuse is *ye us kay gher ka mamla hai, hum kon hotay hain bolnay walay*, meaning, 'it is his private family business who are we to interfere in it?' As we

saw in the case of Sakhi in *The Bride*, this cultural acceptance of the role of men as the proprietors of women and the reduction of women's bodies to the status of private possessions of men has been, "an important mechanism of power and social control in an abusive relationship and is used by men as a way of attaining and maintaining a relationship of dominance and subordination that is central to patriarchal order" (Abraham 591). Abraham further reports that the internalisation of these cultural notions about men's superiority over women or about male proprietorship of women's bodies leads to the normalisation of abuse as a daily life experience for battered women. Sidhwa brings out the coercive effect of this continuous battering through the character of Hamida, Sakhi's mother in the novel, who was physically and mentally broken by the abuse she suffered at the hands of her male kin, including her son. Hamida had fallen into the habit of accepting this abuse as a normal female experience until Zaitoon's effort to escape from the abusive cycle makes her look at it as an act of violence naturalised by men to sustain their dominance over women (172–175).

Theorising the historical lack of support, or hesitation of the nationalist institutions/State to intervene on behalf of battered women, feminist (re) readings of the social contract theory point out that men symbolically use control over women to prove their legitimacy and power to enter into the political arena: "men's original political rights in the public sphere derive not from their rights as 'freeborn' sons but from masculine rule or the *husband's unquestioned sexual access to his wife's body* in the private sphere. And it is this 'God-given' sexual right exercised over women within the family that defines men as individuals or citizens and women as their other, the fundamentally dependent subjects" (Sarkar 52; original emphasis). Jayawardena and de-Alwis present another argument to explain the reason behind the failure of South Asian States to take any effective action against the exploitation of women inside homes and families. As proven by the success of Hindu religious orthodoxy to stopping the filming of *Water*; the Islamisation during General Zia's period in Pakistan (the time when Sidhwa wrote *The Bride*); and the honour killing of Samia mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, the State often relents to the demands of maintaining the asymmetrical status quo of women inside homes to placate the traditional or orthodox religious factions in society, in an attempt to preserve its own political power. Major Mushtaq in *The Bride* fails to do anything for Zaitoon until she crosses out the boundary of the tribal area because he knew that any intervention in the tribal areas by the

Pakistani army would disturb the delicate balance of peace between the locals and the State. Similarly, Sidhwa's introduction of Gandhi at the end of *Water* is a significant critique of Hindu nationalist discourse. In the novel, we hear Narayan talking about Gandhi's ideology of permitting widows like Shakuntala, Kalyani and Chuyia to remarry and to integrate into mainstream Hindu society. Sidhwa shows that when Shakuntala begs his followers to save a battered Chuyia by taking her along with them on Gandhi's train, nobody steps forward to help her. Their lack of willingness to rescue Chuyia is emblematic of the failure of the Indian Nationalist movement to improve the conditions of the Brahmin widows. Martha A. Chen and Kumkum Sangari have pointed out that although Gandhi and the Indian Nationalist movement promised freedom from subjugation for the Indian widows, in reality they failed to bring any effective or significant change in the status of the Brahmin widows. As a result, a vast majority still suffers in the holy cities like Benaras. Historically, the marginalised classes like the widows and the Sudras (the untouchables), were mobilised against the British Raj on promises of socio-economic betterment. However, after independence the issues of the widows and the Sudras were subsumed under the rubble of wider nationalist, political and economic issues. Similarly, Ahmad (59), Jamal (126-135) and Rouse ("Gender", *Shifting* and "Outsider") cite several examples from Pakistan's legislative, political and nationalist discourses to prove that not only are women ideologically posited as wives and mothers within Pakistan's social structure, but the sanctity of society and the nation itself is thought to be conditional on their role as the preservers and upholders of traditions, moral and ethical values. The orthodox religious groups and the traditionalist sections of Pakistani society frequently exploit this ideological mindset to obtain legitimacy for the continued hegemonic control of Pakistani women in marriage, families and society in general.

The third important factor that Sidhwa's fiction depicts as being responsible for the exploitation of South Asian women is the construction of their bodies as the symbolic capital of the family, society, community or nation. As discussed earlier on in relation to *The Bride*, a woman's identity is predominantly construed in relation to her male kin: she is a daughter, a sister, a wife and mother, or a whore. Her chastity, virginity, modesty and subservience are the measure of the honour of a man/community/nation and her slightest transgression (real or imagined) against the male-laid code of conduct results in serious consequences for her, which range from

verbal or emotional abuse to murder and killing in name of *izzat* and *ghairaat* (honour). Commenting on the obsession of South Asian societies with women's purity and chastity, Abraham points out:

South Asian cultures ascribe a high value to women's purity . . . Sexual purity of the woman is a measure of the male honour of her family and kin. . . . [T]here is considerable pressure to harness women's sexuality by limiting their social interaction with other men. Sexual relations prior to and outside of marriage for women are taboo as family honour is closely linked to controlling women's sexuality. (596)

The work of Menon and Bhasin (208-235) on the effects of the 1947 partition on women in the Indian sub-continent highlights that the construction of women's bodies as icons of community honour led to their abductions, rapes, killings, forceful conversions and marriages by Muslim, Sikhs and Hindus as a means of shaming their opponents. Sidhwa gives us a momentary flash of this historical sexual violation of South Asian women at the beginning of *The Bride*, and more fully in *The Ice-Candy Man*, when she depicts Sikh men cutting off the breasts of Muslim women. The amusement that Nikka and Qasim feel at the former's rape of Brahmin women in the disguise of a Brahmin priest is born out of the joy of defiling the honour of their religious opponent, the Brahmin Hindu man. Furthermore, the rape of the Brahmin women who are desperate to get pregnant, is all the more enjoyable for Nikka because his virility is proof of the masculinity of Muslims as a community and conversely the femininity of the Hindu nation as a whole: "Communalism, operating within and through patriarchal structures of power, has particularly foregrounded its varied impositions on women's sexuality, their interiorisations and silencing, and rationalised their commodification, their rape and immolation" (Jayawardena and de-Alwis xxiii).

The research of Zia-ullah, Knudsen and Jafri point out that it is not merely the suspicion of or the actual sexual transgression of women that could result in their violent abuse in the name of honour. In fact, any attempt of women to question, object or subvert the authority of men or to even raise their voice for their own rights has the potential to be decoded as shaming or sullyng the honour of a man/community/nation: "Whenever women assert their rights to choose, or abused wives attempt to get out of abusive relationships, all the patriarchal coercive forces join hands together to suppress

the revolt and to eradicate transgression by using all cultural, religious and political weapons” (Khan qtd. in Jafri 103). Sidhwa’s *The Bride* also reflects a similar construction of male honour when Zaitoon’s running away from Sakhi’s violence is jointly interpreted by his tribe as a challenge to their masculinity and a shaming of the honour of Kohistani men. Zaitoon’s fight for her basic human right to live is seen as an instance of her moral and ethical corruption. This fictional event has firm basis in reality: the same thing happened in the honour-killing of Samia Sarwar in Lahore (discussed in the previous chapter), whose act of asking for divorce from an abusive husband was looked upon as the corruption of her morality under Western influences. Her murder was defended and legitimised by the men of her tribe in the name of the tradition of avenging their honour:

True-blooded *Pakhtuns* would never allow some bodies to dismantle the most revered assets of *Pakhtun* and *Pakhtunwali*<sup>35</sup> in the garb of feminism and human rights [. . .] nobody should be allowed to tamper with the Pakhtun—Honour and *Ghairat*<sup>36</sup> which are the emblems of the *Pakhtuns* code of life—*Pukhtunwali* distinguishing and singularising *Pakhtun* nation among other races [. . .] with their most Westernized mindset they could not grasp the bare fact that a true-blooded *Pakhtun* would never compromise when his *nang* (honour, esteem, reputation, shame, disgrace etc.) is at stake. (Yousufzai qtd. in Jafri 94-95)

In the entire discourse of honour constructed around the purity and piety of women, the bodies of women are reduced to the level of objects which are abused, brutalised, amputated and murdered for the sake of either defiling someone’s honour or restoring it. Sidhwa’s narratives suggest the irony inherent in the construction of the notion of honour is that, in the case of women, it does not reside in their actions; rather it is always the “*others*” (members of family, community or society) who code or decode their body in terms of honour and shame. The precarious cultural positioning of a woman’s honour/shame has been poignantly captured by a fourteen-year old illiterate Sindhi girl in her oral poem:

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26. Pakhtun are a tribe that form major part of the Northern province of Pakistan and Pakhtunwali can be roughly translated as the set of codes, customs and traditions that mark their way of life.

27. Roughly translated as manliness or manly honour.

What is there to my body?  
 Is it studded with diamonds or pearls?  
 My brother's eyes forever follow me.  
 My father's gaze guards me all the time,  
 Stern, angry.  
 Then why do they make me labour in the fields?  
 All day long, bear the heat and the sun,  
 Sweat and toil and we tremble all day long,  
 Not knowing who may cast a look upon us.  
 We stand accused, condemned to be declared *kari*<sup>37</sup>  
 and murdered. (translated by Dawood 3)

Sidhwa's feminist approach in her works is more descriptive than revolutionary. She is fundamentally interested in unmasking and highlighting the religious practices, economic factors, and social norms and traditions which marginalise women and oppress or exploit them in South Asian societies. The characters in her novels do not revolt against patriarchal oppression because of their own suffering, awakening in them a feminist consciousness; instead, their actions are more dictated by self-preservation or love. Shakuntala's subversion of the patriarchal ideology in *Water* is limited to rescuing Chuyia from Madhumati's exploitation. Her revolt is the product of her maternal instincts to save the child and she, herself, along with other widows of the ashram remains fixed within the same structure of oppression. Her questioning of the scriptures (the Dharmashastras) creates a conflict in her mind but that conflict never reaches the strength or maturation to initiate her rejection of the oppressive values. Narayan, following the Gandhian ideals of equality and love, subverts the religious patriarchal structure by deciding to marry Kalyani, but his subversion is also largely motivated by his romantic inclination towards the widow. When he finds out about the exploitation of widows like Kalyani at the hands of rich Hindu Brahmin men like his father is followed by Kalyani's subsequent suicide, he opts to leave his home rather than take any stand against the oppressive system. Similarly, in *The Bride*, Carol decides to leave Farukh and return to the United States because she feels that the brutality, rigidness and conservatism of Pakistani society are slowly chipping away her humanity, while her

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28. A sinful, dishonourable woman. In Pakistan, honour killing is called karo kari in one of the indigenous languages.

understanding of the patriarchal oppressive forces at work in Pakistani society remains naively simplistic and generalised. Miriam's efforts to stop Qasim from marrying Zaitoon to Sakhi are generated by maternal protective feelings. She does not see anything wrong with the overall system of marriage in which the fates of girls like Zaitoon are decided predominantly without their consent, or with the social system of the seclusion and domestication of women like her in the *zenana*. Likewise, Zaitoon runs away from her husband because she is afraid that his violent behaviour will kill her one day and so her actions are motivated by survival and self-preservation rather than a feminist understanding of Sakhi's abuse being the violation of her rights as an autonomous individual. Neither novel portrays characters who posit a real threat or challenge to patriarchal dominance, nor do we see the use of a subversive collective strategy to destabilise the asymmetrical power relationships existing between men and women in South Asian societies.

As mentioned briefly in the beginning of this chapter, Sidhwa talks about female desire and her novels depict, in brief instances, a woman's experience of her sexuality. For example, we hear about Zaitoon enjoying her sexual experience with Sakhi as she discovers the pleasures that her body can give and receive (169-164). By openly writing about the taboo subject of female sexuality in her novels, especially by showing a woman to be an equal partaker in the physical pleasures of copulation, Sidhwa is guilty of violating the rules of verbal *purdah* or modesty in discourse that is expected from women in South Asian societies: "the overarching culture in South Asia is one in which there is not much open discussion of sex" (Abraham 597). However, Sidhwa's depiction of female desire in the two novels, especially *The Bride*, is more in the pattern of Mills and Boon romances, where such descriptions are incorporated to the plot to create sensationalism. Sidhwa fails to effectively problematise the issue of female desire in both her novels and, unlike Mehta's *Fire* where the lesbian relationships lead women to reject heterosexual desire and along with it the dominance of men, or Walker's *The Color Purple*, where the intimate experiences of Celie with Shug result in the former's emotional and physical healing, in Sidhwa's texts the experience of sexual autonomy by women characters like Zaitoon do not lead to any such subversion or feminist awakening.

Furthermore, Sidhwa does not offer any, let alone revolutionary, alternatives to female experiences of male dominance in either of these two novels. In *Water* there is no silver lining for the widows like Kalyani who try to transgress the boundaries imposed on them by a rigid religious patriarchy. Kalyani's suicide sends a bleak message to Sidhwa's readers, suggesting that the patriarchal ideologies form such a strong and solid front that anyone who tries to resist or flee is bound to be doomed. Similarly, the two characters who do make it out alive from the clutches of their violators, Chuyia and Zaitoon, end up in a semi-dead state being carried rather than walking out. The future of both characters is left ambiguous; we are not given any indication as to whether or not Zaitoon and Chuyia will physically survive and if they do, what chances they have of recovery from the complete physical abuse and humiliation they were subjected to. Sidhwa offers a mystical solution to the problem of patriarchal subjugation, marginalisation and abuse faced by South Asian women rather than suggesting religious, social or political revolt as a means of breaking down the hegemonic control of patriarchy. In *The Bride* Carol tells Farukh, her husband, that she believes that Zaitoon was able to escape her doomed fate because her willpower and inner spiritual strength, of divine or metaphysical origins, helped her – as it does everybody else – to fight against injustices and dominance: “I think she forced her destiny; exercised her ‘*khudi*’<sup>38</sup>. I'm sure she will make it” (*The Bride* 229). Similarly, in *Water*, Shakuntala is moved by Gandhi's mystical message that the solution to one's problems resides in searching and fighting for truth, for God and truth are one and the same thing: “for a long time, I believed that ‘God is truth’. But today I know ‘Truth is God’. The pursuit of truth has been invaluable to me. I trust the same will be true for you as well” (*Water* 196). Sidhwa's fiction seems to advance the conviction that unless women feel the need to change their status quo, no social, political or economic change can benefit them as the continuation of oppression is contingent upon the willingness of the oppressed to accept the dominance of the oppressor. When considered together, the messages in the novels seem to suggest that the only way to fight against patriarchal oppression and hegemony is to seek the truth behind religious injunctions, social customs, and traditions and then to fight against the false constructions with all one's

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29. The philosophy of *Khudi* has been articulated by Allama M. Iqbal, an eminent Muslim philosopher, thinker, mystic and poet of South Asia. Iqbal believed that by exercising *Khudi*, which can be roughly equated to a cross between one's ego, self-respect and self-actualisation, an individual can become master of his own destiny or fate.

might. Sidhwa seems to believe in the dictum that truth can set one free and a freed soul can become master of his/her own destiny.

The inclusion of Carol as a foil to Zaitoon in *The Bride* adds another dimension to Sidhwa's feminist stance. Carol can be seen as a symbolic representation of the consciousness of the European, largely British, white women who wrote extensively about South Asia (especially about the status of women) in their travelogues, journals and diaries during the British Raj. Like Carol, these British women lived in South Asia and in their initial encounters were taken in by the richness of the indigenous culture in terms of its architecture, clothes, craftsmanship, foods and ornaments. This difference of culture was romanticised by these women to create an "exotic other" and in their writings South Asia became emblematic of "the Orient", defined by cultural and geographical exoticism, a place filled with romance and mystery: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 87). In *The Bride* Carol admits to being swept off her feet by the glittering exotic world around her: "Lahore seems to love Carol. Pakistani men bent over her gallantly, pressing drinks and lighting cigarettes. Beautiful women, graceful in soft flowing garments, chatted with her in exquisite English. There was a party every single evening. Ironically, she felt like someone in *Gone with the Wind*" (*The Bride* 107). The gaze of the coloniser not only romanticised South Asia, it also stereotyped its culture as *the other*, symbolising all that was inferior, ahistorical and primitive in comparison to the white man's civilisation. According to Sara Suleri, the colonisers articulated a firm belief in "the cultural stasis of the subcontinent" (105) and saw it as a world which was not only ancient, static and fixed at a point in history, but also that was incapable of changing (Lonsdale 146). Carol looks at Kohistan and generally on Pakistani culture with the same "othering" gaze: "Your civilization is too ancient . . . too different . . . and it has ways that can hurt me . . . really hurt me . . . I'm going home." (*The Bride* 229)

Another defining feature of *Orientalism* is that it conflates differences. Thus, the various countries constituting Asia were turned into a single, monolithic and homogenised whole called "the East" where the men were despotic and the women were mere passive victims of their oppression. The inclination to see South Asian women as "a species of deprived sisterhood" (Lonsdale 144) also characterises contemporary Western feminism in relation to what Mohanty calls "the third world

difference” (53). According to her, Western feminists have been guilty of homogenising the differences of class, caste, ethnicity, religion, race, colour and literacy in their discussions of women belonging to developing countries, positing them in their theoretical discussions as women who are already constituted by their “object status” (158). This bias in Western feminism is depicted through Carol’s perception of the South Asian woman:

She recalled Alia, one of her first friends in Pakistan. They said she was a princess surrounded by the antiquity of priceless possessions. . . . Her enormous eyes had haunted Carol ever since they met . . . she had glimpsed in the recesses of those eyes the horror of generations of cloistered womanhood. And the pitiless arrogance of absolute power: a memory of ancient tyrannies . . . .A branch of Eve had parted some way in time from hers. (227)

She goes on to draw parallels between the oppression experienced by Alia and Zaitoon, and then extends it to include a comparison between South Asian Muslim women and other Muslim women around the world:

No wonder women here formed such intense friendships – to protect themselves where physical might outweighs the subtler strengths of womanhood. . . . At least in Pakistan they were not circumcised! Small mercy! A pathetic, defiant gesture here and there invited the inevitable thunderclap! . . . That girl [Zaitoon] had unlocked a mystery, affording a telepathic peephole through which Carol had had a glimpse of her condition and the fateful condition of girls like her. (228)

In the first extract where Carol talks about Alia, she takes the powerful position of the Western feminist subject who gazes, while Alia is reduced to a mute, passive and powerless object that is being looked at. As in the stereotypical descriptions of the colonisers, we do not hear the voice of Alia and thus we have no way of knowing how much of what Carol tells us is real and how much is a figment of her imagination. Similarly, in the second extract, Carol makes a giant leap when she compares Zaitoon and Alia’s condition with Muslim women from Africa and Middle Eastern cultures who are subjected to genital mutilations. In both extracts it is Carol, the middle-class white female, who is speaking on behalf of “generations of cloistered women” which are

joined together in sisterhood because they ostensibly experience “a sameness of [read patriarchal] oppression” (Mohanty 56) whose quality remains the same across the globe, whether it is in Africa, Asia or the Middle East. Carol, like some of the Western feminist critics, constructs an image of Asian Muslim womanhood or Muslim womanhood that is ahistorical. It fails to take into account the complex dynamics of various factors like race, class, and colour, creating women like Zaitoon or Alia as the “material subjects of their own history” (ibid).

Marnia Lazreg has warned that any feminist theory that refuses to ground its construction of womanhood in concrete or material political and historical circumstances runs the risk of being essentially ineffective: “They [the third world women] are inevitably seen as evolving in non-historical time. They virtually have no history. Any analysis of change is therefore foreclosed” (87). Interestingly, however, while Sidhwa seems to offer a critique of the tendency of Western feminists to general or simplistic analysis and representation, she herself falls prey to the same mistake. Sidhwa’s depiction of Koshistani people is largely orientalist and essentialist. She sees their ways of life as being ancient and refers to them as a primitive tribe bound by old customs and traditions. Her depiction of Sakhi, his brother Yonus Khan and their father appears to contain no redeeming features. The difference of their culture is largely narrated through the voices of Carol and Zaitoon, which results in the depiction of a community that is ahistorical, unchanging and fixed in time. Overall, however, in *Water* as well as *The Bride*, Sidhwa remains true to the commitment of depicting the lives of South Asian women from a feminist perspective.

Within the corpus of Pakistani English literature, *Water* and *The Bride* form two significant examples of feminist literature. Both of Sidhwa’s novels break the South Asian myths built around the sacredness and sanctity of the home or the family. Through the characters of Madhumati, Kalyani, Chuyia, Shakuntala and Zaitoon she shows that the exploitation of women begins inside the home and the ideology of *chadar aur chardewari* is a patriarchal ploy which has been used to keep women subjugated. She further exposes how once a woman steps into the public sphere, the State not only fails to grant her the status and rights of an equal, autonomous civic member of the nation but also is unable to protect her. The incident surrounding the filming of *Water*, the failure of the State to help widows like Madhumati and Shakuntala who are deprived of their lawful share in their husbands’ inheritance and,

more importantly, the inability of the State to construct a welfare system that can provide relief to the thousands of destitute widows suffering in *ashrams* all around India or protect the victims of marital abuse like Zaitoon, exposes the public neglect and the incriminating silence of the nationalist forces or the State itself in relation to the exploitation, abuse and violation of women in South Asia.

Historically, men have been able to exercise power over women because they have been the originators, interpreters and perpetrators of knowledge; *Word* is power and whosoever possesses *the power of naming* has the ability to construct and constitute the world around him to his advantage, not only for himself but for others too. Women have suffered because they have not been a part of the knowledge-making and disseminating processes. The first step, thus, in challenging male supremacy is to (re)possess this power of naming. By telling tales, women writers like Sidhwa accomplish this. Sidhwa redresses the imbalance of power by giving voice, through her novels, to those whose stories have never formed part of national histories and discourses: stories that have been silenced in the name of modesty, chastity, honour and shame. Sidhwa's voice, then, can be considered a feminist subversive voice because it puts names to the anonymous faces of those who oppress and identifies those whose lives are lost in the name of religion, culture or tradition.

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