

# **When I Raised My Head Again**

Feminism and the Female Body

in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels

*The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India*

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### Patriarchy, Feminism and the Female Body

The novels of Bapsi Sidhwa are peopled by women, by stories of female suffering and courage and by female characters that come to life through the course of the stories told. Like a red thread through Sidhwa's novels runs the image of the female body. Of all ages, of all social standings, of many different religions and ethnicities, in many different places and situations of life – the image of the female body is the image of Sidhwa's novels, and the most powerful symbol in them.

Outspokenly feminist, Sidhwa's novels bring the attention of the reader to women's situation in India and Pakistan, both during the British Empire, in the turbulent period after independence and the division of the country, and in the decades after independence. The novels bear the imprint of both older and more modern feminist literature, firmly situating Sidhwa within the feminist literary tradition.

In the two novels considered, there is a focus on female bodies to such an extent that the body becomes a symbol of much larger proportions, and thus deserves to be seen in a larger context than that of each individual novel. The image of the female body is the key to Sidhwa's feminist project. The aim of this thesis will be to shed light on the ways in which the image of the female body represents the novels' feminist message.

This will be done through a close reading of each of the works considered, followed by the analysis of issues found in the close reading and a discussion of these in the light of other critical works. The organisation of the thesis will be fairly straightforward, in four chapters: This introduction, one section analysing *The Pakistani Bride*, one analysing *Cracking India*, and finally the conclusion, where lines between the two novels will be drawn.

#### The Life and Works of Bapsi Sidhwa

Bapsi Sidhwa is often considered Pakistan's most important writer in English. She wrote four internationally acclaimed novels between 1978 and 1993, all of which have been translated into several languages. Thirteen years after the publication of her latest novel, 2006 brought several new publications from Sidhwa. New editions of her novels were released, as well as a new novel, *Water*, based on Deepa Mehta's film with the same title. Sidhwa also edited the anthology *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore*.

In addition to her literary contribution, Sidhwa has been an active participant in the public and political debate in Pakistan, especially regarding women's rights. Sidhwa has received several awards for her authorship, both in Pakistan and internationally.<sup>1</sup> Despite her position in Pakistani literature, Sidhwa is not well known in Norway and Europe. Therefore, a broader presentation of her as a writer and feminist seems useful at this point.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born 11. August 1938 and grew up in Lahore, which provides an important setting in all of Sidhwa's novels. In an interview with *Monsoon Magazine*, Sidhwa describes her childhood as 'very like Lenny's life in *Cracking India*' (Rajan). Like Lenny, Sidhwa had polio as a child and this resulted in her not being sent to school. Her family did not live in a joint family household, and Sidhwa consequently spent a lot of time alone or with the servants. Feeling isolated from children of her own age because of her illness, Sidhwa resorted to reading as a way of spending her days. The first novel she read was Louisa May Alcott's classic *Little Women*. As she puts it herself: 'this introduced me to a world of fantasy and reading – I mean extraordinary amounts of reading because that was the only life I had' (Rajan).

Sidhwa grew up in a strict Parsi, middle-class household. The Parsis, or Zoroastrians, are a minority religious and ethnic group in South Asia. Originally from Persia, they immigrated to India in the eighth century, fleeing Islamic expansion. They were allowed to settle in India on the condition that they would seek to blend into society and not attempt to convert Indians to Zoroastrianism. Adhering to this condition, the Parsis have kept mostly to themselves, allowing neither marriage outside the religion, nor conversion. Still, they have sought to maintain a friendly relationship with all other ethnicities and religions and to stay neutral rather than choose sides in the conflicts between Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims.

At the time when Sidhwa grew up, Lahore was a city with around five million inhabitants, of which there were only two hundred Parsis. The Parsis of Lahore adopted some practices from the large majority of Muslims in their city. Sidhwa's home was thus gender segregated. She says: 'When my brother's friends came I was told, "You better disappear," --- that sort of thing. So, I had no idea who I was or what I was' (Rajan). Unfortunately, Sidhwa does not elaborate on her last point, but it leaves the impression that the gender segregation of the household she grew up in, and the tendency perhaps to see her first as a girl and not first as a person, had an impact on the formation of her identity. Sidhwa also refers several times to how questions of identity and belonging were raised in her as a young girl. She mostly had

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<sup>1</sup> The following paragraphs on Sidhwa's life and work draw on the information displayed on her homepage and on her statements in the interview 'Cracking Sidhwa' by Julie Rajan.

Muslim friends, and with the Islamisation of Pakistan after the country's founding father Jinnah died, the Parsis' right to call themselves Pakistanis was constantly being questioned.

Strict and traditional as the household of Sidhwa's parents was, they were still upper-middle-class and educated. Consequently, Sidhwa got a higher education available to few Pakistani women at that time. She graduated from Kinnair College for Women in Lahore with a Bachelor's degree in English in 1956. She got married in 1957, at the age of nineteen, to an Indian Parsi from Bombay. Sidhwa stayed in Bombay for five years, until she got divorced and moved back to Lahore with her two children. Getting a divorce at this time was not common in Pakistan, but perhaps more accepted among the educated elite classes.

In 1963, she married her present husband and they lived in Lahore for around twenty years. In 1983, Sidhwa and her husband emigrated from Pakistan to the United States and now live in Houston, Texas. Sidhwa says:

[A]s a woman, [the United States] has given me a tremendous amount of freedom. The sense of being able to just take off, on your own, without having to have company. In Pakistan and India, we tend to move in bunches and do things together, and you're always part of a family, or a group. Here, you don't carry so much "baggage" when you take off. (Rajan)

This and other of her experiences as an immigrant in the United States have found their way into her novel *An American Brat*.

It was in the United States that Sidhwa started her career as a teacher and lecturer. She was offered a position teaching creative writing at the University of Houston and has since taught at both American and British universities, including Columbia University, Mount Holyoke College, and Southampton University. She was also the Fanny Hurst writer-in-residence at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts in 1998-99.

After embarking on her second marriage, Sidhwa started writing. The wife of a businessman and part of the wealthy upper-middle-class of Lahore, she had time to spare and was reluctant to waste her days. She describes her life in Lahore as 'more of the idle type [...], a very constricted sort of life. You play a lot of bridge, go to coffee breakfasts and do volunteer work. It was a mindless sort of life. [...] I guess it just evolved automatically – writing took up the slack in my life' (Rajan). She continues: 'Writing has been my passion. It is the music in the background of my life. Otherwise, my life was just the restricted life of a woman with children, being a public relations officer for your husband, that sort of thing' (Rajan). Writing, however, was not a common occupation for the women in the community Sidhwa was part of at that time. She says: 'our friends were all in business or lawyers [...].

And to say that I was writing would have sounded odd' (Rajan). Consequently, she wrote her first two novels in secret from her social circle, with the exception of her husband.

*The Bride* was the first novel Sidhwa wrote, but *The Crow Eaters* was the first to be published. Sidhwa's personal favourite, this novel depicts the life of Freddy Junglewalla, his family and his rise in society in Lahore. Filled with anecdotes that show the culture and society of the Parsis, *The Crow Eaters* is considered a declaration of Sidhwa's love for her culture. Still, the novel exposes the oppression of women and violence against women that happens right in the middle of the Junglewalla family. In the late 1970s, publication in English was rare in Pakistan. After having been rejected by several publishers, Sidhwa had to take the matter into her own hands and printed *The Crow Eaters* herself. It came out in Lahore in 1978. The Indian company Orient Longman accepted the novel the year after and it came out in India in 1979. Jonathan Cape published the novel in Britain in 1980.

*The Bride* was also published by Jonathan Cape, in 1982. The novel narrates the story of the girl Zaitoon's life from childhood until she escapes her ill-matched marriage. Focusing on women in marriage and on female sexuality, this is perhaps the most feminist of Sidhwa's novels. *The Bride* later came out as *The Pakistani Bride* in India. One can only speculate as to the reasons for the change in the title, which was not requested by Sidhwa. It is not unlikely that the Indian publishers wished to make an artificial distance between India and Pakistan, and consequently between the marriage practices in the two countries, which are actually very similar. The edition used in this thesis was bought in India, and thus bears the title *The Pakistani Bride*.

Sidhwa's third novel, *Ice-candy-man*, also deals with Partition, but more closely than in *The Pakistani Bride*. The story is seen through the girl Lenny's eyes and focuses on women's stories from the time of Partition. *Ice-candy-man* was published in Britain by Heinemann in 1988. In the United States it was published by Milkweed Editions as *Cracking India* in 1991. The name was changed by the publishers so as better to attract potential American readers. The new title placed the novel more clearly as part of the new wave of fiction from India, gave more importance to the political and cultural themes in the novel and a less central position to the character named Ice-candy-man. The novel has since been known as *Cracking India*. It was named a New York Times Notable Book, received the Literature Prize in Germany and was nominated by the American Library Association as a Notable Book, all in 1991. *Cracking India* was also successfully adapted for the screen in the Canadian writer and director Deepa Mehta's film *Earth* from 1998, as part of her acclaimed trilogy on controversial and feminist themes: *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water*.

Sidhwa's fourth novel, *An American Brat*, was published by Milkweed Editions in 1993. This is the only one of Sidhwa's novels that is set mainly outside Pakistan. Although the story begins in Lahore, the heroine soon travels to the United States, where she encounters the different sides of American culture as an overseas student. *An American Brat* is Sidhwa's only contemporary novel, dealing with contemporary issues: the life of the South Asian diaspora in the West, women and education, arranged marriage and what happens when a Parsi falls in love with someone who is not only American – but also Jewish. In 2003, Sidhwa adapted this novel for the stage in Britain under the title *Sock'em with Honey*. The play was also produced by Stages Repertory Theater in Houston in 2007 with the title *An American Brat*.

Sidhwa's last novel is *Water*, which was published by Milkweed Editions in 2006. This novel is based on the screenplay *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta, and tells the story of unwanted Hindu widows in the first half of the twentieth century.

#### Patriarchy, the Female Body and Sidhwa's Place in Feminist Literature

Bapsi Sidhwa's novels *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* are her most feminist works. The two novels tell the stories of several different women in Pakistan approximately from 1940 until 1960. The focal points of the novels are women, how their lives are constricted by men and how they try to manoeuvre inside a narrow space of rules and expectations to improve their conditions for life, love and freedom. The stories show the cultural and social systems of Pakistan and women's place in these – especially women's position when it comes to marriage and sexual relationships.

Women in the novels are, to a large degree, seen and treated as objects in the power of men. Men's power over women in this male dominated society is shown through the socio-cultural power of the fathers and the husbands, but also more violently through the physical power of men in general. There is also a focus in these novels on the more diffuse power of the culture and traditions of the society in which the characters live, and how the requirements and expectations of the society limit and direct how women should lead their lives. Men's control of women's lives implies male control of female bodies. In *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* female bodies are given away in marriage transactions, secluded and hidden in the female quarters, beaten into submission and subjected to rape and prostitution. To varying degrees, the men in these novels try to gain and assert their power over women and, hence, over female bodies.



In *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* there is, consequently, an ongoing power struggle over who should have the right to control the female body. The men's physical and social power is challenged in different ways by the central female characters. These women demand to be trusted with the status of acting and speaking subjects rather than passive and silent objects. These demands, and the actions they lead the women to, are the central driving forces in the plots in both novels.

As a contrast to the objectification of women in society and also to some degree in the family, Sidhwa brings tales from the women's private lives in the women's quarters, where they are free to talk and act like they want to together with their female friends and relatives. Sidhwa shows the contrast between the outside, 'male', world and the inside, 'female', world, and she lets the women speak of their private thoughts and feelings. Female sexuality is also focused on, something which is quite uncommon in a Pakistani novel.

When Sidhwa started writing in the 1970s, the feminist novel in the United States and Britain had developed, strengthened and transformed through several centuries. In Pakistan, on the other hand, there had not been written many feminist novels. This meant that Sidhwa was quite alone in her literary landscape. The lack of a feminist literary tradition to build on meant that inspiration and feminist literary belonging had to be found elsewhere. Sidhwa's novels thus combine elements from Anglo-American novels written in the last two hundred years.

*The Pakistani Bride* was written in the 1970s and *Cracking India* in the 1980s. In both novels, Sidhwa looks back to the historical Pakistan and India, respectively of the 1950-60s and the 1940s. With few role models from her own country, the prospect of writing about feminist issues in a deeply rooted patriarchal society must have seemed like an enormous task. Sidhwa could have picked any historical period or geographical setting, including her own, and she would have found more than enough material about which to write. Like many Indian and Pakistani writers, Sidhwa chose the period before and after Partition for both *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India*. The novels are set in different neighbourhoods of the large city Lahore, but also in tribal areas in the mountains and in Punjabi villages – perhaps to be able to show several aspects of the patriarchal society. The novels aim to show the reader how women were treated and how women suffered in those times. The situation for women, and especially for rural women, had, however, not changed much in the years that lie between the action of the novels and the time of writing. The choice of historical settings for her novels may be deliberate: Perhaps it was easier for Sidhwa to criticise the conditions of women's lives when she told her stories from a historical perspective.

*The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* contain few suggestions for what can be done to change the society described. Instead of openly challenging the age-old traditions of segregation of the sexes and female submission, Sidhwa focuses on the documentation and explanation of these traditions and their consequences. While the Anglo-American feminist writers of her time wrote novels about women (and men) challenging the system, going in their own directions and making their own rules, *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* hold few challenges to the system. It must have seemed vital to Sidhwa to bring forth the facts of women's lives and raise people's awareness of the injustices committed, before any changes for the better might be proposed.

The lack of a feminist Pakistani literature is connected to women's position in Pakistani society at the time. Feminism was and is vastly a Western movement. Although the years since the publication of *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* have seen a rise in feminist awareness in Pakistan, the work for women's rights is still in its early stages. There are several phases that have to be gone through to be able to create a society in which gender does not determine your life, work, participation in politics, lifestyle choices and so on. This may also be the case for feminist literature.

The type of feminist literature written in a society reflects the feminist causes that need fighting for. Early Anglo-American literature written by and about women often highlighted marriage and economical independence as a cause to fight for. Jane Austen focused on how young women of her time were totally dependent on making a good marriage, and how their own family finances often were essential for a marriage to be made. She did not, however, write novels that challenged the whole system of her society, but she exposed the realities of the system and probably raised the readers' awareness of women's situation.

In the United States the genre of 'woman's fiction' was immensely popular in the mid-nineteenth century (see Baym). These novels, written for and by women, had a didactic aim in that they try to inspire young women to take charge of their own existence and make a good life for themselves. That did not mean breaking with the traditional patterns laid out for them. The novels rather urged readers to take pride in themselves and try to become as good a person as possible. This could be done by helping others, doing good deeds and using their intelligence and spirituality to become exemplary women and citizens. Thus, this genre aimed to equip women with self-worth and self-confidence.

Other writers in the nineteenth century went further in criticising and challenging society. The novel *Fettered for Life* by Lillian Devereux Blake is a good example. In this novel, different aspects of the oppression of women are uncovered. Domestic violence,

discrimination on the job market and prostitution are all exposed. The novel presents a range of women who apply different strategies to meet a harsh world: From a cross-dresser who is working as a journalist in the guise of a man to a female doctor who is also a traditional wife. However, the novel does not find a way out of the chains in the title for the characters who want it the most and who fight the hardest to break free. Perhaps there was no way out at the time the novel was written, and, again, the characters who are happy and alive by the end of the novel are the ones opting for marriage.

*The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* bear many resemblances to the different novels mentioned above, especially *Fettered for Life*, with its bleak view of women's position. What sets *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* apart from these nineteenth century novels, however, is the focus on the female body and especially female sexuality. Nineteenth-century literature, and most certainly woman's fiction, did not concern itself with the body as sexual and reproductive. Where the body was mentioned, it was as the dwelling of the soul. Sidhwa's focus on sexuality places her novels within modern literature, although many other elements of her novels look back to the nineteenth century. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, of course, put its impact on the literature written from then on, and there was a focus on sexual liberation and choice for both women and men.

### Theoretical Background for the Thesis

In the writing of this thesis, critical works and theory from different areas of academia have been put to use. The main bulk of criticism used is probably best described as postcolonial feminist literary criticism, but I have also used literary criticism that is exclusively feminist and exclusively postcolonial. In addition to the literature dealing with Sidhwa's novels and with feminist literature, I have used background information about Pakistan in general, as well as anthropological works on patriarchal societies and women's rights in Pakistan.

Postcolonial feminist literary criticism is an area of literary criticism that is growing. This area of literary theory takes feminist concepts and places them in a postcolonial setting. While Anglo-American feminist literary criticism most often deals with the power relationship between men and women and how this is described, challenged and subverted through literature, postcolonial literary theory deals with the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, between the western and 'the other'. Postcolonial feminist literary criticism thus combines these two, and often concentrates on the double marginalisation and oppression of women in earlier colonised parts of the world – in societies where women are seen as lower than men, and where 'coloured' women are lower than

‘white’ women. Many postcolonial feminists also bring Marxist theories of class into the equation, and look at the issue of class, and often caste, in relation to sex and ethnicity, a social construction which places caste-less (or poor) women of non-western origin as the lowest of the low.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s writing is, as has already been mentioned, not well known in Norway, but she is better known in other countries, and there has been some research done on her works, especially in the United States and in South Asia. To get an overview of the field, I have read as much as possible of what is available, both on the topic of the female body and on Sidhwa’s novels. The postcolonial feminist criticism I have used in the writing of this thesis mostly concerns itself with literature from the Indian subcontinent. The range of works analysed is large: World famous and local, novels and short stories, written in English and in Indian languages. Some of the critical works are explicitly feminist in their approach, while others focus more on postcolonial issues like borders, the nation and identity. Much of the critical writing concerning Sidhwa focuses on her description of Partition – the process in which British India was divided into India and Pakistan – and on her novels as depicting the birth of the Pakistani nation. The topic of the child narrator is also something that has been analysed by many.

I find that the majority of critics who have written about Sidhwa’s novels have a tendency to evade the central image of the female body which permeates her work, and to treat the issues of female sexuality and of violence against women only in passing. This confirms my belief that an analysis of the female body and female sexuality in Sidhwa’s novels is necessary both to broaden this field of criticism and to fully recognise the powerful feminist message that lie between the covers of her novels.

In the essay collection *Margins of Erasure*, Niaz Zaman in the article ‘Images of Purdah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Novels’ gives an overview of the subject of *purdah* (veiling and segregation of the sexes) in Sidhwa’s three novels *The Pakistani Bride*, *Crow Eaters* and *Cracking India*. This is one of the critical works where *purdah* and the oppression of the female body are given centre stage. It is also the only article I’ve read on the *Crow Eaters* which gives attention to the forced prostitution of the character Rosy.

The article ‘Border Work, Border Trouble’ by Ambreen Hai is a study of postcolonial feminism in *Cracking India*. Hai focuses on Lenny’s Ayah and uses postcolonial, feminist and Marxist thought in her analysis of the novel’s feminism. Hai’s article is by far the most critical of the texts that have been used here. Above, I compared Sidhwa’s feminism to

nineteenth century feminist novels. It is this lack of open challenge to the patriarchal society that is especially criticised by Hai.

The article 'A Study of the Stepfather and the Stranger' by Cynthia Abrioux analyses the images of the stepfather and the stranger in *The Pakistani Bride*. The analysis of these images is brought together in an interpretation of the novel as an allegory of Pakistani society where the stepfather, the strangers and Zaitoon represent different parties in Pakistani politics. The article is slightly essentialist in that it focuses on the feminine as positive and the masculine as negative. Also, the text has a tendency to skim over the top of the novel and not delve deeply enough into the material. Nevertheless, it has been useful to read critical texts by writers who have a different take on the novels. Another critic who focuses on the relationship between the body and the state is Diane S. Allen. In her essay 'Reading the Body Politic in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels', she argues that there is a connection between what happens in India and Pakistan and what happens with the bodies of Ayah and Lenny in *Cracking India*. However, most of her article deals with *An American Brat*, which will not be analysed here.

Sangeeta Ray, in her book *En-gendering India*, also focuses on the relationship between the nation and the female characters of the novels she analyses. She has one chapter dedicated to the analysis of *Cracking India* in comparison with Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*. Her main focus in *Cracking India* is Ayah, Ayah's body and the way in which the trope of nation-as-woman forces women into a symbolic position which is immensely harmful to them in a situation of ethnic or religious conflict.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan's article 'Women in History' is concerned with the ways in which patriarchy is challenged in *Cracking India* and *The Pakistani Bride*. Her focus is on the female characters and their roles as objects, but also on the way in which some of them transform into 'pillars of strength' in the face of crisis. Many of these topics are also discussed in Nilufer E. Bharucha's article 'From Behind a Fine Veil', which gives feminist analyses of three novels by Parsi authors.

In her article 'Gender and Beyond', Meenakshi Bharat compares several novels from the Indian subcontinent and analyses the role of the girl child in these. She stresses the importance of Lenny's position as a female and as a child during Partition, and places her as doubly marginalised and victimised. Bharat is not the only critic focusing on the child narrator in *Cracking India*. This is the topic for the articles 'Child Narrators' by Asha Sen and 'Postcolonial Children' by Sujala Singh as well. Sen concentrates on how the child narrator exposes patriarchy through her innocent eyes, while Singh focuses on how the child Lenny represents the nation, functioning as a bridge between the reader and an unknowable world.

It is not only postcolonial feminist theory which has proved relevant to the topic in question. I have also used other feminist criticism in my research. For the section above about feminist literature, I consulted Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction*, which gives an important insight into a genre of early feminist fiction that has been forgotten by many. Gayle Rubin's essay 'The Traffic in Women', although concerned with sex/gender systems in general, has given many insights into the patriarchal society of Pakistan. This essay combines anthropology and feminism in a description of sex/gender systems and how they operate. One of the central ideas is that, in many cultures, women are exchanged as gifts between men to enhance the men's social and economic relationships. Women are seen as the property of their male kin and do not have the right to rule over their own bodies and lives. This is a useful concept, especially in relation to *The Pakistani Bride*.

Toril Moi's essay 'What is a Woman?' discusses the terms sex (biological, physical) and gender (social, cultural), and contrasts the different uses of these with Simone de Beauvoir's idea that the body is a situation. Moi wants us to put less emphasis on the sex/gender distinction, but she also recognises the necessity of that distinction in several contexts. Moi describes the general scientific idea of sex at the end of the nineteenth century as 'pervasive sex' (11). Women and men were seen entirely as products of their reproductive organs – inherently different, all-male or all-female, and this affected all their behaviour. This is a view of men and women very similar to the one held by the patriarchal society in the novels considered in this thesis. To me, the sex/gender distinction is a useful one in the analyses of *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India*, precisely because the society depicted does not take into account that there may be a distinction between the two.

The male gaze is also a term that will be used here.<sup>2</sup> The term was originally coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. It is mostly used in connection with feminist analyses of visual media, like paintings, films, advertisements and comics. The male gaze is a way of describing the power relationship between the observer (traditionally the man in the above genres) and the observed (the female body). This observation of the female body is linked to sexuality and sexual harassment, and one of the feminist points is that the person watching for example the film is forced to look at the female body through the male gaze, whether s/he wants to or not. The male gaze is a concept that may also be used when analysing literature. Transferred from the world of the media into the real world or the world of a novel, the concept is still valid. Not only actresses and models are

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<sup>2</sup> This background information on the male gaze draws on the entry on Laura Mulvey on the Wikipedia website.

objectified – women in general experience the male gaze. This is indeed very much so of the women in Bapsi Sidhwa's novels – one might even say that the whole concept of purdah exists because of the male gaze.

When reading a novel from a radically different culture, relying solely on narrative and literary theory can perhaps be too much of a risk. Not wishing to humour my own prejudices and pre-impressions, I have consulted works to help me treat the topic justly. The books I have used are from the field of anthropology. While the literary criticism mentioned above has given me fresh and challenging looks on Sidhwa's novels, the anthropological works have helped me gain a broader understanding of her novels placed within society and history.

David G. Mandelbaum's *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honor: Sex Roles in North India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan* is a book which gives insight into the anthropological study of gender roles in Pakistan, especially considering the practice of purdah and *izzat* (honour). Farida Shaheed and Khawar Mumtaz's book about the situation of women in Pakistan, entitled *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?*, has, like Mandelbaum, provided help in understanding the culture and society that is described in Sidhwa's novels. It has also given important insights into the budding feminist movement of Pakistan.

Other works employ both anthropology and literary criticism, combining the two to give analyses of works of fiction. One of these is *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*, edited by Amina Amin and Jasbir Jain, which gives an overview of the practice of purdah in Hindu and Muslim communities, and goes on to give analyses of several works of fiction from the Indian Subcontinent. Daphne Grace's *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Identity and Veiling in Postcolonial Literature* does something similar, but Sidhwa's novels are not included in her analyses, and her scope is wider than Amin and Jain, covering much of the Muslim world as well as the Indian subcontinent.

In addition to the critical works mentioned above, I have also used online references and several publications by Gale Research to find critical and biographical background on Sidhwa.

## Chapter Two

### *The Pakistani Bride*

#### Oppression Embodied

*The Pakistani Bride* is Bapsi Sidhwa's most outspokenly feminist work. Through an array of different characters, Sidhwa explores women's conditions of life, love and self-worth in Pakistan. *The Pakistani Bride* is a novel of women in marriage, women and sexuality, women as objects of male control and women as subjects of their own feelings. All through the novel, the focus is on female bodies. Whether looked at by men or experienced by women, the female body is the most important image of the novel, and this image links with the most important theme: Women's conditions of life in Pakistan. The image of the bride, both in the title and in the novel, is a more specific image than the female body in general. The bride becomes a symbol of men's power over women's lives and women's bodies: Not having a word to say in the arrangement of her marriage, the most fateful transaction of the bride's life is her wedding.

The style of writing in *The Pakistani Bride* is varied and Sidhwa draws on several literary traditions in her narration. The novel displays traits of the travel novel, gothic novel, fairy tale and ghost story and the realistic novel. However, *The Pakistani Bride* is first and foremost a feminist novel, and can in many ways be said to be related to the tradition of nineteenth-century American woman's fiction. These early feminist novels are less focused on how women should try to emancipate themselves and more concerned with making readers aware of the nature and results of the oppression of women by men. The main focus of these novels is, however, to show how the heroine manages to carve out a good life for herself *within* the existing framework of gender and social relations. The focus is one of enlightenment and negotiation, rather than one of challenge. The novels also make room for the heroine's internal development, as she becomes more secure in her role as a woman and in herself.

Many of these typical traits of the nineteenth-century woman's fiction can also be found in *The Pakistani Bride*. For instance, *The Pakistani Bride* tells the reader of the wrongs committed against women in the society that is depicted. The novel takes a rather pessimistic view of the future of women's rights in Pakistan, and does not make any suggestions for what women can do to improve their lives; the protagonists are still negotiating their ways within the patriarchal structures as the novel comes to an end. Another similarity is the emphasis put



on female community. Love and friendship between women is more central than the relationships between men and women. The narrator and characters in *The Pakistani Bride* repeatedly appeal to the sisterhood between women and advocate that women have to stand up for each other and reach out across borders. The ending of *The Pakistani Bride* does, however, represent a break with the early feminist tradition, as the novel does not end with a good marriage, but with the resolve to get a divorce for the secondary protagonist Carol and a question mark concerning the protagonist Zaitoon's future.

Bapsi Sidhwa got the inspiration to write *The Pakistani Bride* during her second honeymoon. She and her husband stayed in an army camp where the Pakistani army was building a road through the Karakoram Mountains to China. While staying there, Sidhwa heard the story of a Punjabi girl who had come by the camp on her way to be married off to a Kohistani tribal. After the wedding she ran away, but her husband and his relatives hunted her down. Later, her decapitated body was found in the river. This story made such an impact on Sidhwa that she felt compelled to write about the girl's fate, albeit with a different ending.

*The Pakistani Bride* has several plots, and especially in the beginning it can seem quite fragmented. The novel can be roughly divided into four parts. The first part describes the Kohistani tribal Qasim's marriage, the death of his family and the accidental way in which he ends up adopting the Punjabi girl Zaitoon, who has lost her family during the violence of the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan. The next part deals with Zaitoon's childhood, as she takes over the place as the protagonist of the novel. The third part tells the story of Zaitoon's marriage to the tribal Sakhi. A secondary protagonist is introduced: The American woman Carol, who is travelling around the country with her Pakistani husband. In the fourth and last part of the novel, Zaitoon runs away from her violent husband, who chases her through the mountains, and, in the end, she is saved.

When discussing feminism and the female body in *The Pakistani Bride*, the focus in this thesis will be on the fictional society in the novel. Still, the historical Pakistan in the years from 1947 until approximately 1960 is also of relevance to put the novel's plot and fictional society in context. *The Pakistani Bride* is a realistic novel in that it attempts to give a picture of the Pakistani society at the time when the story is set. Moreover, many of the customs and attitudes that are described in *The Pakistani Bride* and in this thesis still prevail in Pakistan. Women's living conditions, especially in rural areas, have not necessarily changed much in the country's first sixty years of existence. Even so, when Pakistan is commented upon in this thesis, this text refers to the historical Pakistan of the 1950s and 1960s and the Pakistan of the novel.

### Kinship Systems and Marriage Transactions

In *The Pakistani Bride*, the female body is focused on through the exploration of marriage, gender segregation, violence and sexuality. For the men in the novel, a sharp line is drawn between the women of their own family and the women on the outside. Women who are relatives are protected, guarded and kept secluded from public life and from men who are not family. Women who are not relatives, and who, for different reasons, are not protected by their men, are viewed with lust. In both cases, women are treated as objects. This perspective on women is predominant in the first part of the novel, and it remains central throughout the second part as well. The first part of the novel thus introduces some basic views of women in the society portrayed. Qasim's marriage and the partition rapes and killings respectively give a warning of the objectification of women and the abuse of women that will be pushed more to the forefront later on.

In their books, David Mandelbaum as well as Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed give detailed discussions of patriarchy in Pakistan. Their insights on gender relations are especially useful when it comes to *The Pakistani Bride* and their works will be drawn on in the following few pages. According to the authors mentioned, in the patriarchal society of Pakistan, marriage is seen as a transaction between two families, not only between the bride and groom. There is, however, a difference in the way the tribals and the Punjabis look at the bride. In the Punjab, the bride is given away to the groom. She will live with his family and can be seen as an additional work force, but also as an additional burden, to the household economy. A dowry is thus paid, originally to give the bride some property of her own, but, in reality, as a payment from her parents to her in-laws for taking over the economical responsibility for her. The tribals do not practice dowry: In the mountains a wife is bought with bride-price. It is more difficult to find a wife in the mountains, due to hard living conditions and a high mortality rate. The bride is thus bought, like a commodity. Having been bought might improve her situation, if one imagines that people will take good care of what they have bought for a high price. Still, having been bought makes her the property of her husband's family, for them to dispose of as they wish. She is not an independent person.

As described by Gayle Rubin in her essay 'The Traffic in Women', the transaction where the bride is given from her father to her in-laws can be seen as a gift-giving ceremony between the men of the two families. Whether the bride's father pays the in-laws to take care of his daughter, or the in-laws pay the father to be able to have his daughter, it is still the men who seal the fate of the girl. She is seen as a burden or as a commodity, and arranging her marriage is bound to include an exchange of money or goods. In the arrangement of her

marriage, it is not the bride who decides, and it is normally not the groom either. It is the older men of the family who are in control, and they will normally decide upon a match that benefits themselves and their own families socially, politically or economically. According to Rubin, this gift exchange is an important part of kinship systems. The giving of women builds alliances between men and, consequently, it builds kinship.

The tribal practice of bride-price as well as the common attitude towards women in *The Pakistani Bride* is introduced on the first page of the novel, when Qasim's father thinks about the girl that has been promised to his son: 'Any girl – and he had made sure this one was able-bodied – was worth more than the loan due. [...] 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' (7-8). In this short passage, the fundamental view of women in the tribal culture is spelled out clearly. The father sees the girl as something he has purchased. He has even made sure she is 'able-bodied', and the association to the buying and selling of livestock is disturbing. Having 'only' one wife himself, he considers taking her for his own property, but decides to 'bestow her' on his son instead. The language used here shows the father's attitude towards the girl as a piece of property that he can give away or use as he sees best fit. This is returned to later in the novel, when Major Mushtaq explains the tribal marriage traditions like this: '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' (137). Qasim, who is at this point ten years old, already has incorporated his father's attitude to women. He sees his bride as a toy and thinks about 'the prospect of a playmate he knew he would have the sanction to tease, to order about, and to bully!' (8). It is also worth noting that the gift transaction and the building of kinship alliances mentioned earlier are both present here. Qasim's family has had a feud with the girl's family over a loan given by Qasim's father. Now, they are given a wife for Qasim instead; the feud is settled, and the family has gained a new ally.

### The Practice of Purdah

The gender segregation in Pakistan means that women and men can lead almost separate lives. This varies with region and class, but the general rule is that men and women live in separate quarters of the house, eat separately and spend as little time together as possible. It is the middle class that practices segregation most vigorously. In contrast to the lower classes, they can afford to keep separate quarters, but they are not as westernised as the upper class. The segregation of the sexes also means that women are confined to the house most of the

day. This segregation is called purdah, which means curtain, referring to the symbolic or real curtain separating the female and the male quarters and lives.

The reasons for the purdah practice are complex, but one of the factors is the attitude towards women and the role women play in upholding and determining a man's honour. The women of the family are viewed as helpless without the men's protection and control. Women are labelled as weak in two senses: physically and mentally. On the one hand, women are considered as too weak physically to be able to defend themselves, thus needing men to shield them from the world. The world outside is seen as dangerous to women, and the women are consequently kept inside the house for most of the day for 'their own good'.

On the other hand, women are seen as threats in themselves. They are seen as mentally unreliable and easily tempted, as well as potential sexual temptresses. The men keep them secluded to make sure they do not have inappropriate contact with male strangers. Women are not only seen as threats towards themselves, but towards the maintaining of the men's *izzat*, honour. The behaviour of the women in the family has a direct effect on the men's honour. It is thus easier for men to keep women secluded, as this lessens their worries about the women's potential inappropriate behaviour.

Women, who are under the control and protection of the men in their families, do still move outside the house. Punjabi married women in the novel hide themselves in burkhas when they go out to visit friends or go shopping. They are often accompanied by a male relative or a servant, or by a group of other women. Younger women, who are not yet married, but who have reached puberty, wear a shawl to cover their heads and, when necessary, their faces and upper bodies. The girls are also accompanied by friends or family. Normally, none of the women in the novel go far on their own: a short walk to a close neighbour is the farthest they may go alone. Women are not supposed to talk to male strangers, or find themselves in a place where they have no specific business. When talking to elders or to men outside the very closest family, the women cover their heads and faces with a veil or shawl to show modesty and protect themselves from the male gaze.

The practice of purdah means that women and men socialise to a very limited extent in the novel. In Western countries, women and men are more used to socialise and relate to strangers, friends and colleagues of the opposite sex. In Pakistan, the segregation of the sexes results in an erotically charged atmosphere. Men and women do not know how to socialise in a non-sexual manner, and men are desperate just to have the chance to see women without burkhas or veils. The American woman Carol experiences the atmosphere of repressed sexuality like this:

Slowly Carol had begun to realise that even among her friends, where the wives did not wear burkhas or live in special, women's quarters, the general segregation of the sexes bred an atmosphere of sensuality. The people seemed to absorb it from the air they breathed. This sensuality charged up every encounter, no matter how trivial. She was not immune. Her body was at times reduced to a craving mass of flesh... It was like being compelled to fast at a banquet. (111-112)

The men were not overtly sexual: rather she sensed their sexual tension. Their desire for her carried a natural tenderness that was reflected in their behaviour to all women. They showed a surprisingly gentle consideration of her vulnerabilities, of the differences between the sexes that made her feel complete – and completed the men. (176-177)

Some men, like the men Carol has met, know how to control themselves and channel their energies romantically. The sophisticated circles in which she moves have so far only shown Carol these men. Other men, on the contrary, have no respect for women and for women's individual rights. This is a result of women being treated as objects in their society. These men take advantage whenever they have the opportunity. This leads to sexual harassment and, in some cases, to violence and rape.

The segregation of the sexes can be said to reinforce itself in a circular manner. When there is little contact between the sexes, men and women do not learn how to deal with each other in a non-sexual manner. The seclusion of women prevents men from learning how to socialise with female strangers in a friendly way. This increases the danger of going outdoors, since some men will be prone to staring at or sexually harassing a woman who is walking alone. This again gives reality to the claim that it is too dangerous for women to go out alone, and the cycle starts over again.

The view of men and women in this society is essentialist, or represents what Toril Moi names 'pervasive sex' (11). Men are seen as inherently filled with qualities that the culture sees as male, and women are similarly filled with female qualities. The notions raised by Western feminists in the twentieth century that there is a distinction between a person's biological sex and a person's cultural or social gender is not considered here. This culture sees a woman as pre-programmed at birth to behave in certain ways and have certain talents. It does not see that much of her behaviour and talents are actually learned through the way she is brought up. Consequently, the whole society is built upon the notion that men and women are inherently different and should occupy different realms of life and perform different tasks in society. The possibilities for women to enter the world of men, and for men to enter women's premises, thus become almost non-existent, as a man who for example changes his child's diapers will be considered an 'unnatural' man and a woman who becomes a builder

will be seen as an 'unnatural' woman. The society of the novel has, in this way, almost eliminated the concept of gender in favour of pervasive sex.

### Prostitution and the Virgin/Whore View of Woman

As discussed above, women are seen as at the same time innocent and sexually unreliable by the society of the novel. This society also makes a clear distinction between women as virtuous mothers and daughters, and women as whores: Double standards considering women's bodies are many. In this culture, the virgin and the mother are the two most respected and sought-after female ideals. A wife is supposed to be pure, but at the same time women's bodies and women's sexuality are considered impure. Giving birth, menstruating and having sex are thus impure for a woman, but being a mother and a wife is the most important and esteemed role a woman can have. Therefore, women have to work very hard not to be overly sensual and active sexually, and to be pure in all other aspects of their lives, to make up for their impure bodies. The modesty and purity associated with the mother, and the virgin-whore mentality, might lead men to see sexual experimentation and enjoyment as an indecent activity with their wives, and cause them to turn away from their wives in favour of the less regulated company of prostitutes.

In contrast to the women who observe purdah are the women who are not restricted by the purdah rules of conduct. These women do not cover their faces, they go out alone and they talk to men who are not part of the family. In contrast to the protection that men show towards women of their own family, the women who show their heads and faces in public are seen by men as a free-for-all. In *The Pakistani Bride*, these women are the dancers in Hira Mandi, Carol and, in the end, Zaitoon. These women are unveiled and unprotected for different reasons, but they all become objects of male lust.

When the men in the novel want to enjoy the company of women, they go to Hira Mandi, the Diamond Market, which is the prostitution district of Lahore. The dancing girls in Hira Mandi are a mix of prostitutes, strippers and courtesans, the business is hiding behind the pretence of being a place of music and poetry, and the girls all can dance or sing. To Zaitoon's father Qasim, the Hira Mandi is a fairy land:

The pungent whiff of urine from back-alleys blends with the spicy smells of Hira Mandi – of glossy green leaves, rose petals, and ochre marigolds. Silver braid hems blue dancing skirts; tight satin folds of the chooridar pyjama reveal rounded calves; girls shimmer in silk, georgette, and tinsel-glittering satin. Qasim, like a sperm swimming, aglow with virility up to the tips of the hair on his knuckles, feels engulfed in this female street. (63)

In the above passage, the whole area of Hira Mandi is seen as a female body. Qasim compares himself to a sperm swimming up the street, and the area is filled with what he sees as female qualities: Dancing, flirting and smells of flowers and perfume. This is the only area in the city where sexuality and sensuality is abundant and open, it is the only place where men and women can look at each other and talk somewhat unrestrainedly. To the love-starved Qasim this has a romantic, as well as sexual, light.

The 'whiff of urine' from the back-alleys is a reminder to the reader that there is a harsh reality behind the glittering façade. The femininity of the area is a display, and behind the illusion, the street is still as masculine as any street in Lahore. The men control the women's lives and movements, like men do in other parts of the city, but the manifestations of the control is different. Instead of keeping the women inside to hide their bodies from other men, the pimps use the girls' bodies to earn money for themselves. Instead of hiding their 'property', they display it for all to see. The differences between a girl in purdah and a dancing girl might be many, but they do have something in common: Neither of them has the power to decide what is going to happen to their own bodies, and they are both economically dependent on men.

The narrator calls the street a mirage, but Qasim does not see this until he loses his way in a dark alley and sees how life is lived behind the romantic façades of the market: 'He looked into squalid rooms, nauseated by the reek of poverty and decay; the reverse side of the tinsel' (64-5). On the other side of the building, Qasim sees a man who forces a disabled, blind and diseased woman to dance in front of a group of spectators, by hitting her with a cane.<sup>3</sup> Qasim naively wonders if any of the men are going to sleep with her, until he realises that they are 'mocking her. A man, obscenely shaking his body, called to her as to a monkey. A couple of men laughed, enjoying the sport' (65). This scene shows how completely a woman is a man's property in the society in the novel. The man who 'owns' the sick woman has no use for her in the house or in his bed. He thus no longer sees her as a woman, but as a dehumanised entity, an animal that he can show off to earn some extra money. This is the first instance where the image of woman as animal is used in *The Pakistani Bride*.

Qasim's reality check is, however, easily forgotten when he gets a chance to go with Nikka into one of the Hira Mandi houses and see a dancing girl himself. Shahnaz, the dancing girl to whom they go, knows how to play on the men's double standards regarding women.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that physically or mentally disabled people, both men and women, have had a very low status in South Asia. This is touched upon later, when Carol recalls seeing a group of children mocking an almost limbless man in the street, while the grown-ups around laugh along instead of interfering. Even so, given women's relative status to men in society, disabled women are even lower on the social ladder than disabled men.

Her eyes are ‘now bold, now shy’ (72), her voice is ‘low-pitched and throaty’ but she touches ‘the tips of her earlobes in a charming avowal of virtue’ (both 73). Ironically, she sings a popular film song about purdah:

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.  
Allah – meri Toba! Allah – meri Toba!<sup>4</sup>  
Oh God – who can have made me? –  
Whoever it is – even he doesn’t know me ...  
Man worships me – Angels have bowed their heads ---  
If my purdah is removed – my mystery is betrayed.  
Allah forbid! – Allaaaah – forbid!  
Allah forbid! – Allaaaah – forbid! (73)

In the society in this novel, women’s essential quality, besides reproduction, is seen as mystery. To the men, the idea of women being hidden adds another level of excitement to the pursuit. In this scene, a girl who dances, sings, strips and probably also offers the occasional sexual services, sings a song about wanting to be allowed to stay hidden behind the veil. What is amazing is that the men do not see the irony of the scene. The song appeals to their image of women as vulnerable, mysterious and virtuous, and it makes them appreciate Shahnaz even more than if she had been acting like a stripper and prostitute. In the girl’s show, the illusion of her virtue plays a part just as important as her dancing and singing.

As the evening goes by and the dancing girl starts her strip tease, the narrator lessens the focus on her talents in singing, dancing and conversation and the objectification of her body becomes more extreme. The narrator says ironically: ‘Poor Nikka and Qasim. Never having possessed riches, they know not the savour of so rich a toy’ (78) and later: ‘They might easily have fallen on the girl, tearing, ripping, and dismembering her to satisfy their anguish’ (79). As the men’s desire rises, Shahnaz gradually becomes less a female person and more a female body:

The body barely reveals its ribs, its spine – it is draped in colour. Her flushed skins 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.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Meri Toba’ translates as ‘I swear’ or ‘My oath’.



[...] 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. [...] The final nudity. Wild, serene, natural as a forest tree at sunset. [...] When her dance resumes it becomes erotic, her movements sensual and brazen. She teases wantonly, secure in the knowledge of her own inaccessibility. (77-8)

It is no longer the dance that is described, but her body. The narrator, taking the position of the male gaze, increases the use of the pronoun 'she' instead of Shahnaz' name, and also increases the frequency of words for different body parts in addition to the word 'body' in the description of Shahnaz.

The scene above somehow gives the impression that Shahnaz, through her beauty, has some power that she can exercise over men. Through the whole dancing and stripping sequence she seems to be in control. She teases and plays with the desperately pleading men. This is an illusion, in the same way as Qasim's perceptions of Hira Mandi. Behind Shahnaz is the figure of the Madam, always pulling the strings and controlling the situation. Behind the Madam are several male figures lurking in the dark: The bodyguards, the musicians and the pimp. Had Shahnaz and the Madam been alone, the men would probably have raped Shahnaz, if not both of them, long before the end of the evening.

What is disconcerting about the chapter from Hira Mandi is that the reader gets to know next to nothing about what Shahnaz thinks and feels. From the external description of her, she does not seem to mind her profession. Knowing nothing else, she might take some pleasure in her status as one of the more high class dancing girls. The function of the Hira Mandi chapter is, however, not to focus on what Shahnaz is feeling, but to expose the men's attitudes toward women.

Sidhwa repeatedly includes dancing girls in her novels. *Cracking India* also includes this topic, but it is in *The Crow Eaters* that the reader gets a real impression of what it might be like to be a dancing girl in Lahore. In *The Crow Eaters*, Yazdi, one of the sons in the family, falls in love with Rosy, a girl he knows from school. Rosy's parents are forcing her to work in Hira Mandi to earn money for the family. When Yazdi's father finds out that his son wants to marry Rosy, he goes to Hira Mandi and rapes her in revenge (136-7). The father's anger with his son is taken out on the female body – another example of how women are seen as manipulative temptresses. The impression that the reader gets of Rosy's situation is desperate. She is broken down emotionally and desperately needs the tenderness and respects she gets from Yazdi. The flirtatious appearance she puts on when she is at work is just an act, and it is probably so for Shahnaz as well.

One more dancing girl is mentioned in *The Pakistani Bride*, and that is Anarkali, ‘the beautiful dancing girl who was bricked in alive by the Emperor Akbar because Prince Salim was determined to marry her’ (47-8). This is a piece of historical information mentioned casually by the narrator in the middle of a description of Lahore. The dancing girl got a street named after her: Anarkali bazaar. The narrator’s way of mentioning these horrible acts towards women in a casual way, amidst everyday happenings, make them stand out even more. The irrationality of torturing the girl to death by slow suffocation when it was the prince who committed the crime becomes clear. Similarly to the scene from *The Crow Eaters*, this shows how far some men would go in their perception of women as sexually dangerous.

To Qasim enjoying the atmosphere and the girls in Hira Mandi is a separate issue from the protection he is showing his own daughter. The youngest girls in Hira Mandi are not much older than Zaitoon, who is at this point around twelve, but this does not seem to bother him. The narrative link between the dancing girl and Zaitoon is made in the three-line quick transition the narrator makes between Hira Mandi and Qasim’s home. The men are sent home from the brothel in taxis early in the morning, and when Zaitoon finds her father sleeping drunkenly on the bed, she is frightened and runs to the neighbour and surrogate mother Miriam. The close approximation of Qasim in the brothel and Qasim as a father adds perspective to his double standard view of women. The fact that Shahnaz and Zaitoon are mentioned so close to each other in the text also works as a warning that, in this society, the road from being an innocent girl to being a ‘fallen woman’ may not be so long.

### The Female Body as a Site for Sex and Reproduction

In a passage describing Qasim and Zaitoon’s walks in Lahore, Qasim thinks of the city and defines it as a female body. Actually, he thinks of it as the body of a female prostitute:

Lahore, the ancient whore, the handmaiden of dimly remembered Hindu kings, the courtesan of Moghul emperors – bedecked and bejewelled, savaged by marauding Sikh hordes – healed by the caressing hands of her British lovers. A little shoddy, as Qasim saw her; like an attractive but aging concubine, ready to bestow her surprising delights on those who cared to court her – proudly displaying Royal gifts. (48)

Seeing this in context with what Qasim thought above about Hira Mandi, this means that Qasim sees Lahore as a prostitute, and Hira Mandi as her vagina. The preoccupation that Qasim has with prostitution and the bodies of dancing girls can be explained with his state of sexual frustration, not having remarried after he lost his wife at the age of thirty-four. Also, more generally for all men who visit the area, it is a sign of the virgin-whore mentality mentioned earlier. The comparison between women and land that Qasim makes is repeated

later in the novel, when Farukh comments that the land gets 'more virginal the further one travels' (124).

To Zaitoon, the city is not female, but her female world is the *zenana*, the women's quarters of the house. The narrator describes Zaitoon's experience of visiting the homes of the other families in their community. The *zenana* is depicted as one, or many, female bodies: 'Entering their dwellings was like stepping into gigantic wombs; the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies' (55). The description of the *zenana* corresponds to Qasim's impression of Hira Mandi in that it is compared to the female reproductive organs. The street of Hira Mandi is the vagina up which Qasim imagines himself swimming like a sperm. In Zaitoon's impression of the *zenana*, the women's rooms are wombs in which babies grow. The *zenana* is described as dirty, claustrophobic and smelly, and, in contrast to Qasim's Hira Mandi, there are no bells, flowers or glittering fabrics in sight:

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. 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. (56)

Words like 'dim maze', 'odours', 'interminable' and 'unventilated' clearly shows what the narrator thinks of the *zenana*. In contrast to the claustrophobic and dirty atmosphere of the rooms is the hospitality of the women, the 'inmates' living in the *zenana* like in a prison. Perhaps the most disquieting part of this description is the last sentence, where the womb is described as a 'mindless vortex'. In the female world there seems to be no room for a mind of one's own – all there is, is endless housework and 'armies of babies'. Whether a woman wants to or not, she will eventually be pulled into the vortex.

Cynthia Abrioux in her article 'A Study of the Stepfather and the Stranger' advocates a different view of this passage. Her article sees *The Pakistani Bride* as an allegory of early Pakistan with Qasim representing the British colonisers as well as the corrupt political leaders of the new Pakistan and with Zaitoon representing the country. In this way, the important feminist issues raised in the novel are ignored. This way the *zenana*, rather than being read as a result of the male need for control over women's bodies, is interpreted as a positive antidote to the violence and corruption of the male world:

Just as the towering ancient Karakoram mountains guaranteed a kind of continuity and natural order above and beyond the world of men and politics, so the zenana offers the security of a world within a world, an inner, womb-like place into which no stranger, no stepfather, may intrude [...] This space, Sidhwa suggests, is inviolable and timeless as from it flow life and continuity. (71)

This paragraph entails a justification for the practice of purdah: Because the male world is so harsh, women must make their own little world where they cannot be hurt by men. That this is seen as positive, is surprising, as it implies that women should lock themselves away to avoid ever getting hurt, instead of demanding to be part of ‘the world of men and politics’ and changing society for the better. Another critic, Fawzia Afzal-Khan, argues pretty much the same view as me in her article ‘Women in History’. She concludes that Sidhwa exposes ‘the one fact that male idealization of the zenana seeks to conceal – that the protection of female virtue is for the benefit of the male ego’ (272-3).

It is not only the grown-up female bodies that are involved in the care and procreation of children. Also little girls’ bodies are carrying babies in different ways. When Zaitoon plays with the daughters in the Mullah’s house, little girls are ‘burdened with even younger children on their hips’ (57). More gravely, later in the novel there is mention of a ten year old girl who is pregnant. Zaitoon, who has learned that babies come when you are married, does not understand the gravity of the situation and exclaims: ‘She’s not married: it’s impossible!’ (58). The other women confirm that it has happened anyhow, and Zaitoon believes it is a miracle. This innocent mention of incest and paedophilia puts an even stronger focus on the sexual abuse of women, and makes the reader more shocked than if the narrator had commented upon it.

### Puberty, the Female World and Marriage

This is the time when Zaitoon’s own body starts changing. From this point in the novel, Zaitoon becomes the protagonist, later to be joined by Carol, and Qasim takes a place in the background. Sexuality and the body are issues that are not discussed openly in this society, and Zaitoon neither knows what is going to happen to her body nor the consequences of it in terms of fertility. Miriam has mentioned to her that soon she might find blood in her trousers, but her first period still takes her by complete surprise. Zaitoon, who is only eleven, has been going to school, playing outside, and acting like the child she still is. Now her ripening body forces her to grow up faster. Miriam tells her: “‘You are now a woman. Don’t play with boys – and don’t allow any man to touch you. This is why I wear a burkha...’” (55). She also refuses to tell Zaitoon ‘how babies come’ (55) with the excuse that she herself is childless,

and thus cannot know how it happens. Later in the novel, after Zaitoon has been raped, a touchingly innocent memory from her puberty comes back to her:

Zaitoon remembered the morning when she discovered the slight taut swell in her flesh – her promised womanhood. Suddenly shy, she had glanced around, making sure of her privacy in the dingy bathing cubicle. [...] She crooked her slight neck and looked at herself. Her eyes and fingers probed the enchanting novelty. The softness was delicious to the touch of her childish, inquisitive fingers... this way and that... pummelling and distorting. A wondrous, possessive pride welled up in her. All along, she had accepted Miriam's pendulous bosoms as symbolic of her sex and the incipient manifestation of breasts of her own filled her with ecstasy. She now longed each day for the privacy of her bath. (232)

This description of Zaitoon alone in the bath captures the pride and excitement that a girl feels when she knows that she will have what is 'symbolic of her sex', namely 'breasts of her own'.

Miriam has for some time been trying to get Qasim started with arranging Zaitoon's marriage. To her mind, Zaitoon will "be safe only at her mother-in-law's... A girl is never too young to marry..." (53). Now she convinces Qasim that Zaitoon should be taken out of school, so that she can stay at home and learn how to take care of the house in preparation for her marriage. Interestingly, it is a woman who most strongly reinforces the traditional values of Pakistani society and who is the most eager to establish Zaitoon as a wife and mother. Miriam, who has not had any education, does not see the value for a woman in knowing how to read and write. From experience, she knows that a woman needs to be good at performing domestic tasks. She also reinforces the view of women as weak, with stating the traditional view that Zaitoon is only safe as a wife in her future in-laws' house.

When she enters puberty, Zaitoon is included in the female world in a new way. She and the other young girls in her community start taking an active part in the wedding celebrations. The narrator states that 'marriages were the high points in the life of the women' (88). This comment displays two fundamental facts about the women's situation. The use of the word 'marriages' shows that it is not only the celebrations of weddings that is the high point, but that for each woman, the actual marriage is the high point of her life. With no education or professional life to prepare for and look forward to, it is natural for young women to see marriage as the one important accomplishment they will have in their lives, and to look forward to it with corresponding excitement. The narrator's use of the words 'women's life', not *lives*, implies that, for women, there are not several options to choose from when shaping one's life. There is only one viable option and that is marriage.

It should be noted here that Carol also has strong expectations of marriage. The narrator comments: 'Growing up in the 1950s, Carol was inexorably conditioned to marriage.'

She had only one recourse with which to reconcile her feelings and her actions. She had found her true love. He must marry her' (179). Still, even though she expects and wants to be married, getting married is not the only thing Carol is planning to do in her life. She is confused as to her academic and professional choices, but she still has vague expectations that reach beyond marriage.

For the girls who are not yet engaged, the women's parties during the preparations for the wedding is a chance to show their skills with handicrafts, dancing, socialising and dressing. It is also a place where they can show the older women, who have sons to marry off, 'the beauty of their forms' (89). The wedding celebrations are where Zaitoon is presented as a centre of social attention for the first time in the novel. With the other women, she is free and relaxed, and she shows that she is confident and comfortable in her own body. At the wedding parties for women 'Zaitoon was in constant demand and obliged with energetic dances copied from Punjabi films. Jumping and gyrating, making eyes and winking, shaking her shoulders to set her adolescent breasts atremor, she flaunted her young body with guileless abandon' (88-9). It is a paradox that this display of flirtatious femininity is reserved for the other women only. The men go to the brothel street to see women dancing and enjoy female company, while the women of their own community are dancing and enjoying themselves behind closed doors. Also, there is an added irony in the fact that Zaitoon is performing a sexually provocative dance in front of the women of her community, while Shahnaz is performing a traditional kathakali dance for the men in Hira Mandi.

When Zaitoon hears of Qasim's plans for her marriage to a boy of his mountain tribe, she is no longer the flirty and confident girl from the female world. Her father tells her: "Bibi, we talked of your marriage." Zaitoon felt her body tremble. She froze'. Her father asks for her opinion, and:

Zaitoon pulled her chaddar forward over her face. Her voice was barely audible. "Anything you say, Abba." She waited. [...] "You saw the stranger I was talking to?" She nodded. "That was Misri Khan, my cousin. I've promised you in marriage to his son Sakhi." Zaitoon sat still. A blind excitement surged through her. "I think you'll be happy [...] We will set off for the hills before the month is over." [...] Zaitoon sat, unable to move. (95-6)

In this scene, Zaitoon shows that she knows what is expected of her. Both from romantic films where the heroine is beautiful and modest, but also from observing the behaviour of other women in her community, she knows that she is expected to leave the decision to Qasim. She should show no excitement or any sense of her own will, even though the news comes as a shock to her. Still, in contrast to her demure and compliant appearance, a 'blind

excitement surged through her', showing that, underneath all her propriety, she does have longings and expectations about life and marriage. This is confirmed later when Miriam and Nikka try to persuade Qasim and Zaitoon that she should marry a Punjabi instead. Still in character as the film heroine, 'Zaitoon, swung high on Qasim's reminiscences, beckoned by visions of the glorious home of her father's forefathers and of the lover her fancies envisaged, merely lowered her head and said shyly, "I cannot cross my father"' (98).

Zaitoon shows two different sides of her personality in this part of the novel. This might actually be a general strategy for women in this segregated society. When she is with the other women, she is open, confident and ready to embrace life. In front of her father, she is quiet, shy and obliging. Zaitoon plays her part as docile daughter and does what Qasim says until the night before her marriage. After seeing how the tribals live, she gets frightened of having to live among them and she begs Qasim to marry her to someone from Punjab. Qasim quickly puts her back in her subordinate place and threatens that he will kill her if she makes him break his word and thereby hurts his honour.

### The Male Gaze

When Zaitoon arrives in the army camp, she becomes the centre of attention for a little while, because the soldiers seldom or never see a woman in those areas. The soldiers 'were helpless in view of this apparition from the Punjab' (102), since they have been away from their wives and other women for a long time. One of the soldiers, Ashiq, falls for Zaitoon, and through him, the reader gets the first proper description of her:

Her eyes were bold and large, contrasting roguishly with the dewy softness of her features. The skin of her full lips was cracked with cold. She kept flickering the pink tip of her tongue between them. Ashiq's lowered eyes stayed a moment on her small feet, encased in childish, buttoned shoes. No wonder she had seemed to fly when she ran. He imagined her bare feet, narrow, high-arched and daintily plump. (102)

Ashiq, unlike some of the other men in the novel, does not try to possess or harass Zaitoon, even though he has been away from women for a long time. When Zaitoon crosses the river on her way to Qasim's village, Ashiq worriedly looks after her, and another piece of information on Zaitoon's body is given to the reader: 'It suddenly occurred to him that Zaitoon always seemed to have been poised for flight; even when she entered a room. It was a quiver in her supple body that started in the soles and high finely drawn arches of her feet' (153). Ashiq is a young man from Zaitoon's own culture, with a simple background, like herself, and most importantly, he understands her reactions and her cultural background.

Ashiq thus comes to represent the alternative to Sakhi as a mate for Zaitoon, the alternative that Nikka and Miriam tried to persuade Qasim into accepting.

It is not only Zaitoon that is being looked at with approving eyes. Carol also draws many looks when she comes to the army camp, and as shown earlier by her thoughts on the repressed sensual atmosphere of Pakistan, she has passed up several sexual offers since she came to the country. In the army camp, she is drawn into an affair with her husband's friend Mushtaq. From the first scene where Carol is present, her attractive looks are mentioned frequently, and the narrator focuses on her body to a much higher degree than with the other characters. She is mostly described through Mushtaq's male gaze: '[h]is eyes, barely glancing at her face, nibbled on the curves beneath her sweater' (115). Later, he is 'hungrily ogling the rich, flame-licked hues of her body' (178). Mushtaq, who sees his wife very seldom since she does not want to live in the army camp, grabs the chance to enjoy himself and does not shy away from taking in Carol's looks.

Zaitoon feels shy and exposed when men look at her. When she arrives in the army camp she 'wrapped the shawl tighter around her shoulders, embarrassed by the avid curiosity of the men closing in from all sides' (123). In contrast, Carol enjoys the attention from the gallant Pakistani men, as well as the warm feeling she gets from their admiring looks. Carol is sitting outside the house with Mushtaq, enjoying his attention:

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 the Major's eyes and was warmed by an exultant female confidence. (110)  
She wanted to revel in the appreciativeness of his stare. But she knew better. Earthy and brazen, the men here expected subtlety from women. She had already responded too much. (112)

Carol feels more feminine when she receives sexual attention from men. Being looked at and admired gives her an 'exultant female confidence' and she wants to 'revel' in Mushtaq's gaze. The contrast between Carol feeling more feminine in the company of men and Zaitoon acting more feminine in the company of women is interesting. The difference is not only cultural, but might also be age related: Zaitoon is only sixteen or seventeen and Carol is twenty-five. Zaitoon's young and fragile confidence in herself as a woman is built up by the attention she gets from Ashiq. When wondering if her future husband is going to like her, she thinks: 'But [Ashiq] liked her. His eyes left no doubt of it' (149).

Not all men look at Zaitoon and Carol in a respectfully appreciative way. The novel is also filled with strangers who stare at the women with filthy looks. These strangers are all



tribal and they all appear out of nowhere, at several points in the text, threatening and intimidating the main female characters. The first tribal stranger appears when Afshan is bathing in the river and she and Qasim are having a fight, in the first chapter of the novel. The stranger's presence is threatening, as he is not only looking, but also trying to separate the two to get Afshan to himself. Together, Afshan and Qasim manage to fight him off.

Carol is also objectified by the leering tribal men at several points in the novel. They look at her and examine her 'insolently' (112) when they walk by the army camp. Their stares prompt Carol to exclaim: "Maybe I should wear a burkha! [...] Haven't they ever seen a woman before?" (113). In fact, she is on to something. Women are nearly invisible in these mountain areas. They do not traditionally wear burkhas, and thus cannot hide themselves properly when they go out. Consequently, the tribal women are secluded within their houses or within their villages to a much larger degree than women are in the Punjab. When Carol and Mushtaq cross the river to be alone and to explore the tribal territory on the opposite side, another tribal shows up suddenly: '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, my emphasis). This passage is a key passage in the treatment of the female body in this novel. This is the most clearly any of the characters come to spelling out what they feel when exposed to objectification and harassment. More importantly, it shows the implications of the exposure for their feeling of self. Carol, who is confident and independent, who believes in her own value and capabilities as a woman, still feels in danger of losing her identity when put under the strain of this extreme objectification.

### Female Sexuality and the Secrecy of Sex

The focus on the female body as seen from the outside is very strong in the first half of *The Pakistani Bride*, with prostitution as the central theme. The looks resting on Zaitoon and Carol, both the wanted and unwanted ones, in the second half are outweighed by the deep focus on female sexuality in this part of the novel. Both the women's feelings about their own sexual and sensual feelings, as well as their experiences of sex are explored in this half. The focus on female sexuality is foreshadowed in the early days of the marriage between Qasim and Afshan, where Afshan tells Qasim openly about her sexual feelings before marriage: 'I used to wander by streams [...] or sit on some high place dreaming of my future husband. Gusts of wind enveloped me and I'd imagine the impatient caresses of my lover. My body

was young and full of longing. I'd squeeze my breasts to ease their ache' (10). Here, the tables are turned upside down from the traditional pattern. The woman is the one who expresses longing and desire, while she is normally in this culture expected to be responding to male sexuality rather than being active herself.

The fantasies of romantic tribal lovers are shared by Zaitoon and Carol. Zaitoon 'had romantic fantasies in which tribal lovers, bold and tender, wafted her to remote mountain hide-outs and adored her forever' (161). Carol, on the other hand, fantasises about being Sakhi's wife. Afzal-Khan argues that 'it is these romantic fantasies of Zaitoon in particular and those of women in general that Sidhwa wishes to destroy. For it is adherence to such fantasies that leads to female subservience by promoting images of men as heroic gods, and women as their beautiful possessions' (273). Both Carol and Zaitoon have these fantasies that Afzal-Khan writes about. Zaitoon's sexual relationship with Sakhi has as its foundation that he represents the man from the fantasy, and she does not realise what his possessive behaviour will entail outside of the bedroom. Carol has based her whole marriage on this fantasy – it was precisely the old-fashioned, possessive, intense nature of Farukh that attracted her in the first place.

Carol has a confident and relaxed attitude to her body, and she is the most sexually experienced of the two girls. She is almost ten years older than Zaitoon, she has been married for a year or so and she has been with more than one man. Carol is used to socialising with men, and her easy way of talking to them makes the jealous Farukh shout at her: "'Don't you know if you *only* look a man in the eye it means he can have you?'" (108). Carol is viewed as promiscuous in Pakistan, but she is not so according to American standards. Before she met Farukh she partied and flirted, but: 'In the area of sex, however, she had moved timorously. Her conventional upbringing, though modified by Californian liberality and the relaxed morals of an affluent neighbourhood, did not permit her to go all the way – except once' (106). With a positive attitude to marriage and a good deal of stubbornness, Carol is determined to stay married to Farukh. She was initially attracted by his exotic looks and gentlemanly behaviour: 'His manner, courtly to the point of slavishness, alternated with an assertive possessiveness that made her feel cherished' (107). As his possessiveness loses its charm, Carol realises that she 'hated what it had done to her. It had corroded her innocence, stripped her, layer by layer, of civilised American niceties. She was frightened to see parts of herself change into a hideously vulgar person' (111). Carol's affair with Mushtaq is therefore not the result of an impulse. Farukh's jealousy and her own attraction to all exotic men – not only her husband – drive her to start the affair.

In contrast to Carol, Zaitoon's experience of sexuality is covered with secrecy and therefore more surprising to find in a Pakistani novel. To her, sex has been a non-subject. This makes her transformation from girl to woman all the more interesting:

Brought up in Muslim seclusion she had not understood the impulse that had caused her often to bury her face in Qasim's clothes hanging from a nail. Breathing in their maleness she had glowed with happiness, taking her impulse to be a sign of her deep affection. Knowing only Qasim and Nikka she had loved them with a mixture of filial devotion and vague unacknowledged sexual stirrings. (161)

Brought up in a sexual vacuum she did not think of sex as good or bad –it merely did not exist. Neither Miriam, nor Qasim, nor any of the women she visited ever mentioned it. She floundered unenlightened in a morass of sexual yearning. Once, snuggled up to Miriam she had rocked her hips and Miriam had snapped, "Stop it!" Zaitoon had been surprised, and hurt by the rebuke that put an end to her innocent pleasure. She had felt rejected. (162)

These two passages show the pre-pubertal or early pubertal Zaitoon, who does not know 'how babies come' or that sex exists at all. Living in 'Muslim seclusion' in a 'sexual vacuum', she does not know the origins of her impulses. Interestingly, the non-existence of sex does not initially make Zaitoon ashamed of her yearnings or make her control herself. Not knowing what her behaviour signifies or what her impulses arise from, she is totally free of shame and she follows her feelings unchecked. At some point, though, her behaviour *is* corrected, when she crosses the line of propriety with Miriam. Zaitoon's feeling of rejection teaches her that there are invisible boundaries to her behaviour of which she has to learn. In both passages, Zaitoon's 'vague unacknowledged sexual stirrings' are directed towards members of her closest circle: Miriam, Nikka and Qasim. Not knowing about erotic feelings, she mixes it up with her love for them as a daughter. These confused sexual feelings result in the two quite controversial paragraphs above.

However, the relationship between Zaitoon and Qasim has more to it than indicated by the passage quoted above. Due to poverty and cramped living conditions, they sleep in the same room, something which is fundamentally against the regulations of purdah described earlier. Zaitoon massaging Qasim's feet may seem unnaturally intimate for a Western reader, but this is actually not out of place in a South Asian setting. What is unsettling, though, is the last night Zaitoon spends as an unmarried girl, sleeping in the cave with Qasim. She begs him to take her home and rather marry her to a Punjabi, and she 'clung to him desperately, digging her fingers into his shirt, her legs grasping him in a vice. He felt her body quiver against him' (157). Furiously, Qasim closes his hand around her throat, and threatens to kill her if she makes him break his word. After his anger calms down, he comforts her, and 'in her dread

[she] clasped him comfortingly close to herself' (158). This physical closeness between stepfather and daughter is against the rules of their culture, and seems inappropriate to the reader as well. It may in fact have given rise to Zaitoon's 'vague sexual stirrings'. This inappropriately close relationship is also most likely something that Miriam has noticed, and this puts her urging of Zaitoon's marriage into a fresh perspective. As quoted earlier, she says that Zaitoon will "'be safe only at her mother-in-law's.'" This fear for Zaitoon's safety may refer to Qasim just as well as to strangers.

Even though Zaitoon might not be able to identify her early sexual feelings, she still knows that marriage is her destiny, and that something that relates to her sexual feelings happens between husband and wife. Her wedding night proves to be both dramatic and fulfilling for Zaitoon. When she is alone with Sakhi for the first time, her body is raging with feelings that are waiting to be met and released 'The sap that had risen in her since puberty and tormented her with indefinable cravings for so long surged to a feverish pitch. [...] She felt at the furious centre of her tumult a deep calm, a certainty that at last her needs would be fulfilled' (161). In the first moment that they see each other, Sakhi is just as much an object of lust to Zaitoon, as she is to him. What stands out in Sakhi's description of Zaitoon is how he, despite their cultural differences, actually has an initial understanding of her and sees her 'large black eyes that had flashed in one look her entire sensuality' (160). On the other hand, Sakhi echoes Qasim's thoughts on the first page of the novel: 'Here was a woman all his own, he thought with proprietorial lust and pride' (159).

When Zaitoon and Sakhi start having intercourse, it is revealed how little Zaitoon knows about her own body and about men's bodies:

In dreams Zaitoon had accepted her lover's hands on her breasts not as a preliminary caress but as the final surrender to carnal intimacy. [...] For the first time she became aware of a wet, burning sensation, almost a painful inflammation, between her thighs. She had been discomfited by it before and had hugged her chest to ease her ache. Taboos, unconsciously absorbed, had prevented her from exploring lower and she had not really known any relief. (162)

Here, it becomes clear that even though she did not know who to direct her sexual feelings towards when she was in her early puberty, she did, with time, absorb taboos unconsciously. These taboos have made her understand that there is something that happens between male and female bodies when people are married, but she does not know what a naked man looks like, and she does not know what exactly to expect from sex:

His action was shockingly strange and her abandon in their preceding intimacies suddenly seemed to her indecent. "What are you doing?" she gasped. "Stop it!" Her body twisted and convulsed. [...] Not knowing the intricacies of the male organ she

did not know that an extension of Sakhi was inside her. She never felt it. She felt only the rhythm of a suction and press against her crotch and gradually, penetrating her pain and her screams, the rhythm beat within her too. With each impact she felt an astonishing sweetness radiate from her loins, a deep stirring within her that churned her senses and turned her blood to honey. Straining towards him, her nails digging into his back, she sobbed in anguished but releasing moans. (163)

These descriptions of sexuality have a style reminiscent of the entertainment novel or the romance novel, rather than the art novel. As pointed out by Niaz Zaman in the article 'Images of Purdah in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels', purdah builds up sexual tension. When this tension is released in the sexual meeting of Zaitoon and Sakhi's bodies, it creates a connection between them. This connection could, however, have been made with anyone else who helped release the tension: 'Sidhwa shows how seclusion keeps women innocent but also at the same time creates a sexual excitement which makes arranged marriages work' (159). The combination of not having any sexual experience and of having all her sexual excitement focused on one person, makes it easy for Zaitoon to accept Sakhi as her husband, since their sexual acts stand out as special to her. As Zaman says, this can be a glue to make arranged marriages work, although the glue is not strong enough in the case of Zaitoon and Sakhi.

Despite the sexual connection they make on their wedding night, the relationship between the two soon deteriorates. Unfortunately for Zaitoon, she has, even before their marriage, lowered herself in Sakhi's opinion. Before their wedding, Sakhi spied her laughing and talking in Ashiq's presence and this makes him suspicious of her from the start. When Zaitoon, in front of all of Sakhi's kin, bareheaded and crying begs Qasim not to leave her, it humiliates Sakhi's pride. Still, in the beginning, he treats her well and tries to comfort her. Later, Sakhi's brother taunts him about his difficult wife, and, to regain the respect from his brothers and restore his self-confidence as a man, Sakhi starts beating Zaitoon into submission. Despite Sakhi's abuse of her, there is still a sexual spark left within Zaitoon: 'At night she acquiesced docilely. Sometimes though, when the lamplight gilded their isolation, she surrendered to him with an unreasoning passion.' (174) Fortunately, this passion does not lure her into staying with her abusive husband, and Zaitoon flees the mountain village.

### Liberation and Return to Dependency

When Zaitoon runs away, she is alone for the first time in her life. She is no longer defined in relation to others. Cut off from society, she is no longer a woman, but a female human, or an animal struggling to survive. Before, she has been a daughter and a wife. Her roles have been defined with basis in her being a woman and she has been raised to embody the characteristics

and expectations that her society has of her as a woman. Released from, or bereft of, her roles, Zaitoon's culturally learned femininity is diminishing and her animal instincts take over her body. This transformation from woman to animal begins with Sakhi's violent treatment of her. His attitude towards her is described as that of an animal trainer. Later, he calls her a "dirty, black little bitch" (185) and, with no feeling of female solidarity, the women of the village also call her a bitch after she has run away.

The image of Zaitoon as an animal is predominant in the last part of the novel. This is the section of the novel that is most heavily packed with imagery, and almost all are connected to Zaitoon, her body and how her body is turning animal: 'Like vermin in search of dim crevices, Zaitoon felt safe only in the dark' (194). 'Overcome by a sudden panic, she began to scramble across boulders like a crab' (195). It is, however, the image of Zaitoon as a bird that is most frequently used: 'She was a fledgling far from its nest' (195). Later, Zaitoon comes upon a vulture, which she sees as mirroring herself:

Hating the bird, she sensed in a flash her own repulsive condition. [...] A part of her perceived with painful clarity the vulturine length of her scrawny neck, her gaunt protruding shoulders, and the ragged blanket shrouding her hunched body as the feathers shrouded the bird's. [...] Hands spreadeagled, holding aloft the wings of her blanket, Zaitoon looked like a bird about to fly yet permanently grounded. (207-8)

This feeling of becoming animal and becoming one with nature is increased during Zaitoon's nine days in the wilderness. When she suddenly finds herself close to a snow leopard being hunted by a man, she feels 'an electric panic from the animal transfer to her' (209). In this situation she, the hunted runaway, identifies more with the hunted animal than the hunting human.

In this part of the novel, nature is described both as healing and threatening. The mountains have been hostile, cold and Zaitoon is scared and nearly freezes to death when walking through them. When she enters lower lands, nature changes and takes on a friendlier face. It seems to want to help her and give her strength:

The sun climbed the mountain slope, thawed the rocks and touched back to life the numbed body of the sleeping girl. (194)

The sun [...] nuzzled up to the girl as she lay face down, gasping for breath and trembling, and its warm magic calmed her. (195)

Her body responded gratefully to the caress of nature and she lay down in the softness, feeling the decayed vegetation cool her burning skin. (212)

In these passages, nature is described as a lover. It is Zaitoon's body that is warmed, nuzzled, healed and woken back to life. Given that nature and land is most often personalised as

female, as in *Mother Earth*, the possibility that the lover is female is an interesting thought. This is one of many instances in this novel where homosexuality or bisexuality is hinted at, but the novel never acknowledges this or engages with it further.

I have described nature in the novel as shifting and unreliable – both hostile and seductive. Abrioux, on the other hand, sees nature as a sort of female guarantor of continuity. This continuity may be the laws of nature, a Darwinian survival of the fittest, but in Abrioux' article nature seems to be on Zaitoon's side. This does not fit well in with the harshness of her experience in the mountains, and it overlooks the important fact that it is in the midst of nature that Zaitoon is brutally raped. The rape happens at the beach, next to the river which has been mentioned many times during the novel. The river is icy, cold and penetrates the (female) land. Contrary to the traditional associations with rivers as symbols of life, the river in *The Pakistani Bride* is threatening. It represents the border between the government controlled areas and the areas that are under tribal law. When crossing the river, both Zaitoon and Carol are in danger of violence, murder and sexual assault. The river is filled with dangerous currents and it is where Carol finds a tribal girl's decapitated head. It is no coincidence that it is when Zaitoon drinks water from the river that two tribal strangers come upon her, trap and brutally rape her:

Cold, speculative eyes measured her wet body. They took in the outline of her ribs, the panting swell of her damp shirt, and the mud in her hair and on her small, terrified face. Zaitoon knew the madness of the still eyes. She stood up hesitantly and started to walk away. [...]

“Wide-eyed little gazelle, we love you. Won't you favour us?” [...]

“Come, let me thaw your cold little heart.”

Zaitoon's desperate eyes held his in horrified reproof. He moved, and despite her terror Zaitoon thought he seemed to be enjoying the chase, like a villager cornering a flustered hen.

She ran.

Next, she breathed in the stench of his clothes, the sickening, bovine smell of his unwashed body. He overpowered her. She was down.

“You can't escape us, my dove.” The man's husky breath sank into her ears. She flailed at him. He caught her wrists, and it seemed her arms would snap. “How thin I've grown,” she thought. She saw the other man get up slowly and walk towards them.’ (214)

This is the only description given of the rape, and it is more than enough to understand the desperate and trapped situation Zaitoon is in. Tribal strangers have been showing up out of nowhere all through the story, making the women feel uneasy and threatened. In this scene, it is proved that the feeling of unease was justified. The rape has been foreshadowed at several points during the novel. Earlier, I have mentioned the scene from Hira Mandi, when Nikka

and Qasim might have ripped the dancing girl apart had they not been supervised. Later, Carol also touches upon the subject, when '[t]he thought of the possibility of rape vaguely entered the rim of her consciousness' (118). There is also a scene in the first part of the novel, where women are raped during Partition.

The two rapists carry on the imagery of Zaitoon as an animal. In contrast to Zaitoon's image of herself as a crawling creature or as a starved bird, the tribals mockingly give her names after softer, more feminine animals. They call her 'wide-eyed little gazelle' and 'my dove'. When one of them chases her, it makes Zaitoon return to her bird images and think of 'a villager cornering a flustered hen'. The tribals' view of Zaitoon is possibly the view they have of all women. To them, women are objects to be bought and sold, to take advantage of when the opportunity presents itself.

With the rape, Zaitoon is mercilessly returned into the order of society as the subordinate woman:

The men had kept her hostage for two hours. When Zaitoon regained consciousness, her body screamed with pain. She wept, putting her trembling legs through the shalwar. Her brown skin gaped through new rents in the cloth. She had not seen her legs in days and gazed in revulsion at the twitching, fleshless shanks. A red spot spread on the cloth between her thighs. She folded her legs quickly and covered the stain with the front of her shirt. Printed with faded lavender flowers, it was torn down the front and at the shoulders. She closed her lids and her fingers flew up to push the hair from her face. (230)

The way Zaitoon tries to regain some sort of dignity after the rape, by dressing again, covering up the spot of blood on her trousers and pushing her hair away, shows that she is returning from the wilderness. She also notices her torn clothes and the flowery pattern on her shirt. She goes on to remember a homeless woman she once saw running madly around in a park in Lahore and compares the woman's fate to her own:

For a moment, Zaitoon saw herself rushing wild and wanton over the mountains. She now knew the woman had been raped. Abandoned and helpless, she had been living on the charity of her rapists [...] In an anguished frenzy, Zaitoon pounded the sand. She cupped her breasts, and pain in a red haze exploded inside her. (231)

It was argued earlier that Zaitoon becomes more and more animal when she is cut off from what has defined her as a woman in the eyes of her culture: Family, society and the purdah system. The rape brings Zaitoon back into the order of society where men are the dominant rulers. The rape places her back in the subordinate role again – in the most painful way. It is after the rape that Zaitoon remembers when she first discovered that she was growing breasts, something which has been discussed above. After the utter degradation she has been subjected



to, her mind returns to the moment when she knew she was becoming a woman, and to all the anticipation and quiet excitement this awoke in her.

After the rape, the descriptions of Zaitoon as animal occur more seldom, but some remain: 'She crawled farther and farther from the beach, creeping up through fissures and stony crevices. For a time she snuggled beneath a slaty overhang, like a wounded animal, to lick her bruises' (232). At the end of her flight, Zaitoon is so broken down and starved that she is pictured as ghostly rather than animal: 'She scurried over the rock like a skeletal wraith' (233). This is picked up on by Mushtaq, who describes her as a 'huddled, skeletal creature' (239) when he comes to save her.

When Zaitoon reaches the bridge which separates her from the army camp, and which is her road to safety, she summons her last strengths of body and mind to make it the last little stretch to her destination. At this point, Zaitoon has almost become an entity outside of her body. The focus is on her brain and she is trying to figure out how to escape Sakhi, who is watching the bridge. '[H]er brain was alert again' (232), '[a]ll her senses were alert' and 'she thought carefully' (both 233). Zaitoon's last decision is to resist the impulse to run across the bridge and rather wait in hiding to see what other opportunities might arise. The last words from her mouth are the croaking whispers: 'Major Sahib, Major Sahib' (238) when she sees Mushtaq approaching her place of hiding. Mushtaq sees her and comes to her rescue:

She opened her mouth, and a croak broke from her dry throat. "Hush," he said softly, "You're safe. Don't make a noise. I'll take you to safety..."

The girl, in an attempt to cover her nakedness, began to smooth and pull at her torn clothes. Mushtaq felt a surge of pity. (239)

From the moment Mushtaq finds Zaitoon, he takes over the action, and Zaitoon's name is lost from the narrative. From this point on, she is 'the girl' and Mushtaq is the focus of attention in his effort to get her unnoticed across the bridge. Zaitoon loses the power of speech, as well as her physical dignity. Nevertheless, she tries to stay in control and keep her identity. She tries to speak and pulls at her clothes to cover herself. Mushtaq takes this as a sign that she has not gone mad. In a culture where decency and modesty is the definition of a woman, Zaitoon's attempts to remain a decent woman are naturally taken as a sign of sanity as opposed to animal madness. The mad woman in the park, in contrast, had been running around with her shirt half unbuttoned and her head uncovered.

It is thus established that Zaitoon has returned to civilisation and to her role and position as a woman. She has returned to the codes and values that she has been brought up with. She has also returned to a state of helplessness, and this to a far greater extent than

before her marriage. The last few times she is mentioned, Zaitoon is wrapped in a blanket and carried first on Mushtaq's and then on Ashiq's back. Mushtaq has helped her put on his jacket and wrapped her up in the blanket, and when he lifts her up, he notices that she weighs no more than his own five year-old daughter. She is also described as 'huddled in a natal curl in the blanket' (239). In this way, the description of Zaitoon in these last pages seems to be more of a child or a foetus than of a woman. She has been set back to the dependent position of a child, with no ability to speak or stand up for herself.

### A Feminist Awakening

While Zaitoon is in the tribal village and later runs away, Carol is in the army camp. In the middle of the crisis in her marriage and her affair with Mushtaq, Carol spends a lot of time thinking about women and the society in which she is a visitor. Little by little, she seems to get closer to finding the truth of herself and of Pakistani society. She is drawn between the exotic comfort and luxury of her life in Pakistan, and her anger and revulsion when confronted with women's situation in the country that has been so welcoming to her. Carol has liked living in Pakistan, because the Pakistanis have made her feel special and cherished. She has been lulled into a sense of safety by the luxury of having servants and going to fancy parties, and by the men's gentlemanly behaviour towards her. Her position as American has let her get away with behaviour that a Pakistani woman would have been severely punished for. The women she has socialised with have been unveiled, quite westernised as to fashion and lifestyle, and thus Carol has not been forced to see the real life for all the women living outside the upper class. Her brief meeting with Zaitoon in the army camp was the first encounter she had with a Pakistani working- or lower-class girl.

While Zaitoon is fleeing into the mountains, Carol gets to know what has happened, and she urges Mushtaq to do something to save Zaitoon. Mushtaq takes a laissez-faire attitude towards the tribals, and says that they can do whatever they want to do, as long as it is on their side of the river. If Zaitoon crosses the river, they might help her. Carol and Mushtaq get into a discussion about men's jealousy and the way women are killed or have their noses chopped off, because their men suspect them of infidelity. Mushtaq is amused at Carol's heated emotions. When he refuses to take her seriously Carol has a realisation:

Suddenly a great deal became clear to her. "So that's all I mean to you," she said. "That's really what's behind all the gallant and protective behaviour I've loved so much here, isn't it? I felt very special, and all the time I didn't matter to you any more than a bitch in heat. You make me sick. *All of you.*"

She stood up and walked slowly to the Mess door. Watching her, Mushtaq found her gait no longer provocative but crushed, subdued, and oddly touching. (224)

This is the last conversation between Carol and Mushtaq. Whereas before he found her sexually attractive, he now finds her touching. He and his culture have slowly crushed her. Carol's belief in human decency has taken a blow and her illusions about the people she has met and liked in Pakistan is shattered. She is no longer as self-assured and provocative as she was when she arrived. She has slowly been worked on to become more like the women that Mushtaq and Farukh are used to: A woman who knows her place. Mushtaq's sexual attraction towards her has ebbed out, and now he feels tenderness towards her. She has become more like his wife and thus she is no longer interesting to him.

Right after this, Carol has an experience that wakes her up for good from her sense of comfort. She and Farukh, in a moment of reconciliation, go down to the river for a walk and Carol sees something in the water:

A darkness swayed on the ripples, and, completing its rotation beneath the surface, the face bobbed up – a young, tribal woman's face.

Carol made a strangled sound and fell to her knees. [...]

She knelt frozen in a trance that urged her to leap into the air on a scream and flee the mountains.

"Probably asked for it," said Farukh.

With a cry she brushed against his shoulder and, jumping over the rocks, clawed her way up the gorge. (225-6)

The girl's head in the river shows what would have happened to Zaitoon had she not run away, and it also shows what is in store for her if Sakhi catches her. The connection between Carol and Zaitoon is further emphasised as Carol 'clawed her way up the gorge' in much the same way as Zaitoon is earlier climbing over the rocks when she is fleeing through the mountains. Mushtaq's amused conversation with Carol about honour killings and Farukh's words come together with the girl's face – Carol has her realisation. She finally understands how far most of the men she is dealing with will go to protect their honour.

Both in the United States and in Pakistan, Carol has been insistent on her right to freedom and she has been intellectually aware of the oppression of women. This experience, however, shakes her to the core and wakes her up to a feminist, political view of the world:

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. What had the tribal girl done to deserve such grotesque retribution? Had she fallen in love with the wrong man? Or was she simply the victim of a vendetta? Her brother might have killed his wife, and his wife's kin slaughtered her... there could be any number of reasons...

Whoever said people the world over are the same, was wrong. The more she travelled, the more she realised only the differences. (226)

Carol takes in the injustices committed against women, perhaps for the first time. Tainted by her recent experiences, her freshly discovered feminist feelings have a negative angle. She sees all the cruelty that women have been subjected to through the ages, and she concludes that the oppression of women is 'an immutable law of nature' (226). She tells Farukh with 'responsibility in her voice and a new determination' (229), that she has decided to go back to the United States: "I think I'm finally beginning to realise something... Your civilization is too ancient... too different... and it has ways that can hurt me [...] I'm going home" (229). Farukh does not believe her, and suggests that she will feel differently when she gets to think about it. This is the last scene with Carol and Farukh. The only thing that is certain at the end of the novel is that they are both leaving the army camp to go back to Lahore.

#### Female Rebellion and Male Control

When walking away with the bundle that is Zaitoon, Mushtaq starts planning Zaitoon's future and thinks of how he can dispose of her. Sending her back to Qasim is no option. Qasim's sense of honour would not permit him to hide Zaitoon in his house, and he would either kill her himself, or send her back to Sakhi to be killed by him instead. Mushtaq thinks: 'In a few hours he would quietly stow her away in the vehicle taking Farukh and Carol to Lahore. Let Carol take care of her! She could hide her in the States! Or perhaps Ashiq could propose marriage after a decent interval – she would be as securely hidden in his village' (245). The way Mushtaq thinks of how to dispose of and 'stow away' Zaitoon robs her of her humanity and takes the objectification of her to the highest level. She is not a human, not a woman, not even an animal, but a thing.

The vague plans of Mushtaq's have been labelled by other critics as naïve and have been pointed out as one of the novel's flaws. To my mind, this naivety is calculated. First of all, these are just musings and ideas that Mushtaq gets when he is walking away with Zaitoon. The first sentence seems sensible. There is already a truck leaving with Carol and Farukh, so sending Zaitoon with them would be convenient. It is also not a bad idea to ask Carol to look after Zaitoon, for the time being. Carol also has promised herself that if Zaitoon survives she will 'do something for her' (229). In the last part of the passage above that, in my opinion, is ironic. Mushtaq uses exclamation marks after his statements, and he normally is not a man of exclamation marks: 'Let Carol take care of her! She could hide her in the States!' To me, this sounds like a mocking tone, especially when knowing what Mushtaq thinks of Carol's notions

of women's rights. Besides, the practicalities of sending Zaitoon to the United States would involve so much trouble for him that it is unlikely that he would bother at all.

When Mushtaq starts talking about Ashiq marrying Zaitoon there is no longer any doubt that he is being ironic. After everything that he has told Carol of honour and the relations between men and women in Pakistan, Mushtaq cannot be serious about his suggestions that Ashiq might marry Zaitoon and hide her in his village. Even if Ashiq, against all odds, might want to marry Zaitoon, there is no chance that his family would ever let him go through with it. Zaitoon is at this point a woman with no name, no kin, no dowry or other property, and, most important of all, she is a fallen woman. She has been married, she has disobeyed her husband, and she has been raped. In the eyes of Ashiq's family, she would be used and dirty, loose and indecent to have exposed herself to men and got herself raped. The reader also knows this, having been taught enough about the culture and traditions of the area to make her own judgment of the situation.

There is, however, not a consensus among the critics as to the meaning of the novel's ending. Abrioux' take on the rescue of Zaitoon is very different from the conclusion hitherto drawn here. I have proposed that Zaitoon has indeed been saved from one threat, but that her life will in no way be easy, and that she will probably be a social outcast for the rest of her life. Abrioux, on the other hand, writes: 'Zaitoon is ultimately protected and saved, which suggests that an awesome, ancient, natural order combined with a young girl's defiant spirit can overcome the oppressive shackles of a conspiracy of men' (70). Again, Abrioux suggests that there is a 'natural order' which will help women get their rights. This is the opposite of what is argued in the novel, where Carol thinks about oppression of women as 'an immutable law of nature' (226). Abrioux' conclusion also overlooks the fact that Zaitoon, despite being saved, is still in the power of men, albeit in the power of men who may wish her well.

Afzal-Khan, on the other hand, sums up the novel's core message, and core problem, like this: 'In *The Pakistani Bride*, Sidhwa does not offer any radical solutions to the dilemma of being a woman in a patriarchal culture. [...] Zaitoon, despite her heroism, must remain an object in a culture whose history continues to marginalize women' (274). Thus, *The Pakistani Bride* forcefully gets its message through to the reader: In the period considered, women in Pakistan were subjected to countless deprivations of freedom of will and of movement, they were subjected to violence and rape and they were the dependent on their fathers and husbands, with no real rights to their own bodies.

The story of Zaitoon starts with her being carried to Lahore by Qasim and it ends with her being carried away, like a child, by Mushtaq. Despite her extraordinary efforts to take

control of her life, she ends up in the power of men. Zaitoon is the only woman in *The Pakistani Bride* who deliberately breaks the rules of her society and decides to put her own life first. She succeeds in running away and manages to get through the mountains to safety. However, she is severely punished for her disobedience and impropriety. She is raped because she is unprotected and finds herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Seen more symbolically, she is raped as a punishment for being out of purdah – and for going against the rules of society. Zaitoon's punishment is also that she will be forced to hide for the rest of her life to prevent her father or husband from finding her. While Sakhi committed the real crime, Zaitoon is the one who will suffer for it. Her rebellion does not seem to have got her very far.

*The Pakistani Bride* moves from male power to female challenge of male power and back to male power again. It moves from the male perspective to the female, and ends with the male. The novel is circular both in plot and perspective. The first half of the novel is dominated by the male perspective on the female body, with the focus on the giving away or purchase of brides and above all with the men's attitudes to and use of prostitutes. Then, the perspective slowly changes to a female one, where the women's secrets are revealed. Puberty, the female quarters of the zenana, women's hopes and dreams and women's experience of their own sexuality are all issues that are explored. This is an attempt from the women to challenge the male dominance and take control of their own bodies from within. Zaitoon's strength enduring Sakhi's beatings and her independence when she runs away both give hope that women will be able to stand up for themselves and try to change their situation.

The ending, however, brings a quick stop to the wave of female experience and strength that has risen through the second part of the novel. The women's rebellion is stifled and the men assume control with the rape, the killing of the tribal girl, and Mushtaq taking total control of the situation. The women are silenced, and the men take charge of the planning of the women's further lives. Zaitoon will live, but what kind life she will live is highly uncertain. Carol has decided to go back to the United States, but Farukh gets the last word when he says that she might change her mind when they get back to Lahore. Despite Zaitoon's rebellion and Carol's realisation concerning her husband's culture, there is no real change in the women's lives by the end of the novel. The women start as dependent on male protection, and end in the power of men. Male dominance is perpetuated, and the rebelling women's wills are defeated and their bodies and pride are broken.

*The Pakistani Bride* is an historical novel. Sidhwa set it in the 1950s, but it might have been set hundred years before, or fifty years after. The Pakistan of today has changed in many ways since the time when this novel is set and since the time when it was written. Still,

'honour' killings and the abuse of women still happen, and the number of crimes that never get reported is high. Sidhwa's main agenda in this novel is probably shaking the reader into realisation of women's situation in her country.

When writing *The Pakistani Bride*, Sidhwa probably had two audiences in mind: a Pakistani intellectual audience and a Western audience. In Pakistan, the people reading novels in English are, generally speaking, the minority who have a higher education. Sidhwa might have been trying to enhance the upper middle class women's awareness of and interest in the feminist cause in their country. The women will recognise most of the issues in the novel, and their eyes will be opened to the more desperate situation of lower- and working-class women. Carol's perspective might show Pakistani women reading the novel how women from other cultures think and feel when coming to Pakistan. Sidhwa definitely also had a Western audience in mind when writing the novel. Both Carol's thoughts and the many explanations of customs and traditions are helpful to make Western readers understand the mechanisms behind the plot in the novel.

#### The Idea of a Female Community

Despite the circular movement of the novel and the bleak future for women predicted in the end, *The Pakistani Bride* does touch upon a way for women to improve their situation, although it is not spelled out clearly. Carol has vague and conflicted ideas about a female understanding that reaches out across cultures. When she and Zaitoon meet, Carol at first feels ambivalent about the younger girl and feels irritation when confronted with her demure attitude. Then, as Carol unwittingly forces Qasim to reveal to Zaitoon that he is not her real father, she sees Zaitoon crying, and tries to comfort her:

In the instant their eyes met, the green and black of their irises fused in an age-old communion – an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as women. For an intuitive instant Carol felt herself submerged in the helpless drift of Zaitoon's life. Free will! she thought contemptuously, recalling heated discussions with her friends on campus. This girl had no more control of her destiny than a caged animal ... perhaps, neither had she ... [...] Carol sat back feeling drained of emotion. (136)

This notion of a universal female experience that connects women across the world is old and can perhaps be said to have been out of date by the time Sidhwa wrote her novel. Later, Carol thinks about this moment, and extends her understanding of what happened:

Carol had a sudden sinking realisation of the girl's plight. She remembered the curious communion between them; and her large sensitive eyes. She now felt they had revealed more than just the hopeless drift of her life; they had communicated faith and

a dauntless courage. Through an awesome act of will the girl had chosen to deflect the direction of her life. Carol felt a compulsion to help her, even at risk to herself. (223)

Unfortunately, there is nothing Carol can do other than encourage Mushtaq to do something. She does ask him if there is not something he can do, and he says he can help Zaitoon if she makes it across the river. When he is in the middle of the situation, however, he does more than that, and actually smuggles Zaitoon over the bridge. There is no mention of why he is doing this, but Carol's words may have had an effect on him.

Despite this meeting with Zaitoon and the greater understanding it gives Carol, she nonetheless has an increasing feeling of being out of place in Pakistan. With time and reflection, she comes to a realisation that she does not belong in the society in which she is currently living. There is no way in which she can adjust herself to fit into the culture without losing fundamental parts of her own identity:

Whoever said people the world over are the same, was wrong. The more she travelled, the more she realised only the differences. She knew Pakistani women with British accents. They wore jeans from the US and tops from Paris. Their children were at Eton and Harvard. She had related to them straightaway: and suddenly their amiable eyes flashed a mysterious quality that drew her into an incomprehensible world of sadness and opulence, of ancient wisdom and sensuality and cruelty... (226-7)

Carol feels radically different from these women and she describes the feeling as if a 'branch of Eve had parted some way in time from hers' (227). 'She wasn't programmed to fit. She'd need an inherited memory of ancient rites, taboos and responses' (227). The vast difference in the way she has been brought up and the way her Pakistani acquaintances have been brought up, has left them a world apart.

Carol's conclusion on this topic lands somewhere in the middle of her frustration over the communication problems she has with Pakistani women and the deep understanding she feels she got from Zaitoon:

No wonder women here formed such intense friendships – to protect themselves where physical might outweighs the subtler strengths of womanhood... [...] The girl 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)

The female 'communion' between Carol and Zaitoon gave Carol the chance to see and understand some of what frustrated her before. At the end of the novel, Carol sees the 'fateful condition' of the many girls in Pakistan. She can see how the women are trapped inside a role that does not give them much choice about how to behave and what to do. Carol also sees how female friendships become life-saving in this culture, and how the high importance put



on the female world is the women's defence mechanism when overpowered by the male society.

This is the nearest *The Pakistani Bride* comes to proposing a way out for the women who are oppressed in this culture. Women have to stick together and help each other, like Carol has tried to help Zaitoon, like Zaitoon's mother-in-law tried to defend her when Sakhi beat her and like Miriam tried to persuade Qasim to marry Zaitoon to a Punjabi. Most of these efforts are useless and are overruled by men. But the female world is there for support, and this support system will at least try to catch their sisters when they fall.

Feminism cannot be seen as one vision or one way, but it has to be seen in context. *The Pakistani Bride* is in many ways a naturalist and determinist work. It describes the oppression of women as 'an immutable law of nature' and shows male society reassuming control at the end of the novel. On the other hand, the context has to be considered. Sidhwa describes what she sees. She does not make an ending that she knows would be impossible. Zaitoon making a new life all on her own, becoming a teacher and marrying for love would be a nice vision, but impossible within her culture. Her novel must be seen as a wake-up call rather than a feminist manifesto.

*The Pakistani Bride's* challenges to patriarchy are based on resistance rather than radical action. Afzal-Khan puts it like this: '*The Pakistani Bride* challenges the patriarchal culture and values of Indian-Pakistani society, for the heroine Zaitoon refuses to submit to the system and to accept the status quo' (272). The fact that Zaitoon does run away is one of these resistances. Most women would have resigned to their fate and tried to minimise their own presence to avoid their husbands' wrath. If they tried to run away, they would most likely have been caught and killed. But Zaitoon makes the life-altering decision to change the course of her life, and she makes it across the mountains without getting caught.

The other challenge to male dominance is the role that female sexuality is given in the novel. The focus on women's bodies as experienced by women themselves is fresh and radical in a Pakistani novel. The portrayal of Zaitoon's puberty, her experience of sex, and her pride and love for her own body is unique in Pakistani literature, perhaps also in South Asian literature as a whole. The most important thing about this focus on female sexuality is the fact that it is a private experience that cannot be taken away from her by anyone.

As Afzal-Khan pointed out in the earlier quotation, Sidhwa does not come up with any radical ideas concerning how women are supposed to gain equal rights in Pakistan. This can be seen as a major feminist problem, but I have argued that *The Pakistani Bride* must be seen in its geographical and historical context, which to a large degree explains the apathy and

bleakness of the ending. Nevertheless, there is hope in *The Pakistani Bride*. Through Carol, Sidhwa advocates a female community that stands together to support each other. Through Zaitoon's actions, she shows that women can resist patriarchal control. Through the representation of female sexuality, she opens the door to a topic almost untreated in her national literature, a topic which gives female sexuality a life of its own. Lastly, through the novel as a whole she seeks to wake people up to the importance of women's rights in her country.

## Chapter Three

### *Cracking India*

#### Cracking the Oppression

*Cracking India* is Bapsi Sidhwa's most acclaimed novel. It has become a classic Partition story, both as a book and on the screen. The novel is centred on an upper-middle-class Parsi household in Lahore during the tumultuous time of the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan. The feminism in *Cracking India* is not as openly stated and the suffering of women is less harshly portrayed than in *The Pakistani Bride*. Labelled and read as a Partition novel, the feminist issues have become secondary in most of the criticism of *Cracking India*, but nevertheless, the same indignation and awareness of the subordinate position of women is there, if only in a more subtle form.

*Cracking India* deals with life in Lahore before, during and after Partition. The novel is filled with childhood memories and everyday anecdotes from the life of the young girl Lenny and her family, the Sethis. Lenny's childhood universe is populated with people named after their professions or the relationship they have with Lenny: Mother, Father, Godmother, Cousin and Ayah (nanny) are all important characters in the novel. From the outside, through the Lenny's eyes, the world of the grown-ups is acutely observed. The first part of the novel shows Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Parsis living side by side as friends and neighbours in Lahore. The next section of the novel depicts the tension that is rising all over India and the violence that erupts when Partition is a fact. The last few chapters deal with the aftermath of Partition and the violence that has changed the lives of all the characters.

Where *The Pakistani Bride* is fragmented both in style, plot and point of view, *Cracking India* is more unified. The novel has a fairly realistic style of narration and has many traits in common with the classic Bildungsroman. However, the novel has a younger heroine than in the classic examples – the reader follows Lenny from the age of four till nine. The young heroine goes through a process during the book: In the end, she is no longer a small child starting to collect her first memories, but a girl on the threshold of puberty, who has learned about the darker sides of human nature.

The novel is narrated by adult Lenny, and focalised almost entirely through the child Lenny. The exception is the story of the boy Ranna's flight from his village, which is told from Ranna's perspective. The focaliser Lenny is female, eight years old, disabled and belongs to the virtually invisible Parsi religious minority. She thus represents the marginalised

– a choice of perspective that seems to be consciously feminist. The voice of a child brings a displaced naivety and innocence to the story, and together with her female perspective, this narrative style brings out even more clearly the harsh realities for women during Partition.

Lenny observes the other characters and gathers her observations as clues to the mystery of the grown-up world. She sees things that she can barely make sense of, but through her eyes, the reader is alerted to many feminist issues demanding attention in the near vicinity of Lenny's household: Her parents' marriage and the other marriages in their community, the relationship between the servant woman Muccho and her daughter Papoo, the sister relationship between Godmother and Slavesister, the kidnapping of Ayah and not least of all Lenny's own position as a girl in the household.

A more pronounced feminist theme in the novel is the economical, spatial, sexual and violent control many men try to exercise over women, both the ones they love and the ones they do not even know. This is seen most extremely in the story of Ayah and of the 'fallen' women. Last, but definitely not least, is the treatment of female sexuality in the novel. The openness and honesty running through the descriptions of Lenny's awakening erotic feelings seem to be without parallel, at least in South Asian literature.

### The Disabled and Unworthy Female Body

There are two female bodies on which the narrator focuses throughout the novel: The sensual and attractive body of Ayah and the disabled body of Lenny. Lenny's disability is closely associated with the early childhood memories that the narrator recalls in the first third of the novel. Visits to the hospital, operations, pain, as well as the advantages of being disabled, are all significant parts of Lenny's childhood and the formation of her identity. To her parents, especially her mother, Lenny's polio is a great sorrow. Her mother blames herself for leaving Lenny with the ayahs instead of taking care of the child herself, and believes this to be the cause of her daughter's illness.

Lenny, on the other hand, does not perceive her illness and later disability as a disadvantage. On the other hand, she thinks that 'having polio in infancy is like being born under a lucky star' (20). Because she cannot walk properly, Lenny is pushed around in a pram by Ayah. She enjoys the attention and pity that she receives, and she knows that 'while other children have to clamor and jump around to earn their candy, I merely sit or stand, wearing my patient, butter-wouldn't-melt ... and displaying my calipers – and I am showered with candy' (18 spelling error in the original). Thus, Lenny deftly uses her disability to her

advantage. This is one of the ways in which Lenny refuses to let her marginalised position, as woman, Parsi and disabled, limit her life.

Cherishing her abnormal foot, Lenny is panicked after an operation when her leg is going to be revealed from its cast: “‘No!’ I scream, unable to bear the thought of an able-bodied future. The suspense – although it has given my forehead premature wrinkles of worry – is preferable to the certainty of an altered, laborious and loveless life’ (23). Luckily for Lenny, her foot, although improved, ‘remains gratifyingly abnormal – and far from banal!’ (24). To Lenny, her disability has become a large part of her identity. She has accommodated herself to it, she is using it to her own gain, and not knowing anything else, she does not have the confidence that she will be able to compete with other children for attention, should her foot become normal.

The fact that Lenny thinks she has to rely on her disability to get love and attention is quite logical when seen in the light of her low self-esteem. Especially when it comes to her body, Lenny does not think much of herself. She compares herself to her brother: ‘I am skinny, wizened, sallow, wiggly-haired, ugly. He is beautiful’ (32). Lenny’s low self-esteem is brought on by thoughtless comments from the grown-ups around her: ‘Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I’m dark enough. Everyone says, “It’s a pity Adi’s fair and Lenny so dark. He’s a boy. Anyone will marry him”’ (90). When Lenny is a little older, her uncle asks her: “‘Why do you have such an unfortunate pair of eyes?’”(180), adding that he thinks she is cross-eyed. Lenny’s low self-esteem is also connected to her parents’ problematic marriage: ‘And, as the years advance, my sense of inadequacy and un-worth advances. I have to think faster – on my toes as it were ... offering lengthier and lengthier chatter to fill up the infernal time of Father’s mute meals. Is that when I learn to tell tales?’ (88). The child Lenny takes it upon herself to fill the silences between Father and Mother, in a sense taking responsibility for repairing the cracks in their marriage.

The feeling of being unworthy is returned to in something that the older narrator Lenny remembers. Lenny and Yousaf, one of the servants, pass by a Brahmin, a high caste Hindu, and their shadows fall over him and his food. The look the Brahmin gives them, a Parsi and a Muslim, is a look of utter disgust. This feeling of being despised and avoided for her religion is similar to the feeling of being outcast as a woman: ‘I experience this feeling of utter degradation, of being an untouchable excrescence, an outcast again, years later when I hold out my hand to a Parsee priest at a wedding and he, thinking I am menstruating beneath my façade of diamonds and a sequined sari, cringes’ (125). This idea that the female body is contaminated is common to many religions. When menstruating or after childbirth, women

may not go to the Hindu temple or the mosque, and in some cases, like with Parsis, may not come into contact with others, and especially not people who are praying. This association of menstruation and the female body with something dirty and untouchable is treated to a fuller extent in *The Crow Eaters*. Here the mother in the house spends a few days of every month living alone in a cloistered room, referred to only as '*the other room*' (69). To protect the other members of the family from her menstruating body, she has to stay away from them, and they have to be warned when she is going to the bathroom, so that her shadow might not accidentally fall on them while they are praying. As is Sidhwa's style when treating these unfair and prejudiced traditions and views of women, the whole situation is seen with an ironic side glance. The mother in the house sees these days of untouchability as a holiday away from her duties in the family – and, paradoxically, as a way of achieving what Virginia Woolf called 'a room of one's own'.

Lenny's disability and sex not only make her physically marginalised. They affect her intellectual opportunities as well. The doctor discusses her convalescence with her parents:

"She's doing fine without school, isn't she?" says the doctor. "Don't pressure her ... her nerves could be affected. She doesn't need to become a professor." He turns to me. "Do you want to become a professor?"

I shake my head in a firm negative. "She'll marry – have children – lead a carefree, happy life. No need to strain her with studies and exams," he advises, thereby sealing my fate. (25)

Somehow the doctor has an idea that Lenny's foot has a connection with her 'nerves'. In this setting, he does not seem to think of her actual nervous system, but of her mood and mental health. If he thinks Lenny's disability will limit her intellectual abilities, or if he is simply speaking on the basis of her being a woman, is unclear. Still, his suggestion that going to school with other children might affect her nerves, is reminiscent of the popular nineteenth century diagnosis of 'hysteria' used about women who were not as obedient and mild as society expected. Asking a five year old girl if she wants to become a professor is, of course, a joke, since nobody in Lahore in the 1940s would have taken a woman seriously who wanted to become one. The child Lenny does not see the lack of schooling as a problem, but is rather happy to be free to go around the city with Ayah. The narrator's comment at the end of the above quotation, however, reveals the bitterness that lies under the surface of the older Lenny's voice. The doctor 'sealed her fate' with his gender-biased statements and Lenny's life is staked out with marriage and children as the ultimate goal.

I've interpreted Lenny's position as female, young, disabled and Parsi as a marginal position, one that has been chosen by the author to make the feminist message of the novel all

the more clear. There are, however, other views that have been urged about this. Nilufer E. Bharucha, in her article 'From Behind a Fine Veil', agrees that Lenny is a marginalised character, but she has a slightly different take on what this entails:

Thus to the biological disadvantage of being female in a male world, are added the handicaps of a physical deformity and a colonial milieu. The novel could thus be interpreted as a political allegory.

However, it also operates as a Feminist allegory. Through the character of Lenny, Sidhwa explores a female universe hemmed in by the restricting and reductive forces of patriarchy and colonialism. (136)

Bharucha suggests that *Cracking India* may be seen as a political allegory, where Lenny represents the colonised and oppressed; or a feminist one, where Lenny represents oppressed women. The choice of the term allegory is something that I must disagree with. *Cracking India* is not a feminist or a political allegory – it's a feminist novel with a feminist message. There is nothing allegorical about Lenny's life and Ayah's life; they are two examples of female lives that could very well have been real.

Ambreen Hai, on the other hand, in her article 'Border Work, Border Trouble', does not see Lenny as a marginalised character: 'instead of being marginal (the lesser of two), she is a borderer (an in-between third) [...]; as a not-yet-sexual, not-fully-classed being, she gains access as an observer into realms of adult politics, village life, and servant sexuality that would otherwise be denied to an adult of her class or gender' (396). Hai's point of Lenny being able to blend into any social situation, without anyone minding her presence, is interesting. Lenny is like a chameleon, she makes herself invisible and unobtrusive to be able to listen in on conversations and witness situations that she would have been removed from had she made herself the centre of attention. However, I do not think that this chameleon quality she has stems from being an 'in-between third'. Perhaps her religion can be considered that, but her gender is labelled and treated as 'the lesser of two' in her society. This feeling of being 'lesser' may actually be why Lenny has developed her chameleon talents in the first place, as seen in her entertaining and thus mediating between her parents in the dinner table scene discussed earlier.

### Children's Bodies and Child Marriages

With her upper-middle-class background, Lenny does, however, have quite a lot of freedom, and good prospects for the future. There are quite a lot of child characters in *Cracking India*: Lenny's brother Adi, her cousin, who is only called Cousin, as well as the next-door neighbours Rosy and Peter, and they all have the same privileged background as Lenny.

Although Lenny will probably have an arranged marriage, she will most likely never experience poverty.

On the other hand, the untouchable girl Papoo has less to look forward to in life. Papoo is the daughter of the sweeper, and she lives with her mother and father in the servants' quarters behind the Sethi family's house. Hated by her mother, Papoo has to endure constant physical and emotional abuse. There is no explanation given in the novel of why her mother, Muccho, dislikes her daughter so much. It may be Papoo's refusal to conform to her mother's image of an obedient girl, or it may be, as Bharucha suggests, that Muccho 'is a victim of a patriarchal society which has engendered a fierce self-hatred in her, which manifests itself in violence against her daughter whom she sees as an extension of herself' (137).

Lenny admires Papoo and thinks: 'Papoo is not like any girl I know. Certainly not like the other servants' children, who are browbeaten into early submission. She is strong and high-spirited, and it's not easy to break her body ... But there are subtler ways of breaking people' (56). Like the little girls described in *The Pakistani Bride*, Papoo has to take care of an infant – the narrator does not say if this is a sibling or not – who is placed on her hip whether she is playing or working. 'In the evening she sweeps our compound with a stiff reed *jharoo*, spending an hour in a little red cloud of dust, an infant stuck to her hip like a growth' (103).

Burdening Papoo with work and responsibilities does, however, not force her into submission, and her mother ends up arranging her marriage to a middle aged man, just to have her out of the house. Papoo is dressed up as a bride and looks to Lenny like a 'crumpled heap of scarlet and gold clothes flung carelessly in a corner' (197). She is only eleven years old and to keep her from protesting and disrupt the wedding, her parents have drugged her with opium to get her through the ceremony. When Lenny sees the middle-aged groom, and notices the way he is slyly looking at her and the other pre-pubescent girls at the wedding, she imagines the 'grotesque possibilities awaiting Papoo' (199). Her future seems bleak, filled with a lot of hard work as the youngest wife, and the risk of sexual abuse by her husband.

Child marriage and little girls dressed as women are mentioned a couple of other times in the novel. Lenny envies the Muslim girls in the park, 'dressed in satins and high heels, the little Muslim girls wear make-up' (105). One time when Lenny is waiting in the doctor's office, she overhears the doctor talking to a married couple with a sick infant. The woman is wearing a burkha and her husband is doing the talking for her, but when the husband cannot answer the questions, 'the woman addresses the doctor directly, looking at him through the netting covering her eyes. "He vomits every time he has milk ... five, six times a day." Her



voice is incredibly young. She couldn't be more than twelve, I think, surprised' (22). The fact that a girl only a few years older than herself is married and a mother, is of course shocking to Lenny. This is another example of the tradition, especially among the lower classes, for marrying off daughters as early as possible.

Later, Lenny goes with her family's cook, Imam Din, to his village in Punjab. There, she again encounters little girls acting like adults. Imam Din's two female grandchildren are 'looking like miniature women of eight and nine' (63). They help their mother in the house, while bearing 'the responsible expressions of much older women' (62). In contrast, their younger brother Ranna, who is only a year or so younger, is allowed to run around on the farm and in the fields playing. At a gathering with their Sikh neighbours, one of the neighbours suggests that the girls' marriages be arranged soon:

Already practiced in the conduct they have absorbed from the village women, the girls try not to smile or giggle. They must have heard their mother and aunts (as I have), say: "*Hasi to phasi!* Laugh (and), get laid!" I'm not sure what it means – and I'm sure they don't either but they know that smiling before men can lead to disgrace. (63)

As have been dealt with to a large degree in the chapter about *The Pakistani Bride*, this shows how girls' behaviour is being controlled from a very early age. At the age of eight and nine, the girls are told not to smile in the company of men. The girls are from the start taught to blame themselves and their own 'inappropriate' conduct as the reason for anything bad or unseemly that might happen to them.

In the society of the novel, the space, both metaphorical and physical, left for women in which to act and express themselves is very limited. As in so many other cases of abuse of or discrimination against women, it is paradoxically the older women themselves who have become the ones enforcing the rules of the male society upon the younger women. This is most tragically the case when it comes to genital mutilation in some north-east African countries, as well as in the harsh and violent treatment experienced by many daughters-in-law in India.

### Education of Desire and the Sexual Female Body

For the young Lenny, not going to school is an opportunity to learn other things about life. By spending time with Ayah, she gets to see large parts of Lahore, with its historical parks and buildings, and she is educated in the game of seduction between men and women. Apart from this, she does actually get some more formal education by going to Mrs. Pen, who teaches her reading, writing and arithmetic:

Despite her efforts to clutter my brain with the trivia and trappings of scholarship, I slip in a good bit of learning. The whiff of Mrs. Pen enlightens me. It teaches me the biology of spent cells and aging bodies – and insinuates history into my subconscious... [...] Whereas a whiff of Ayah carries the dark purity of creation, Mrs. Pen smells of memories. (90)

More interested in the mysterious adult world than in scholarly knowledge, Lenny uses her observant eyes and draws knowledge from what she sees. The person she learns the most from is Ayah.

Ayah has the most described and most desired female body in *Cracking India*. Her chocolate skin, her beautiful face, her ‘rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colorful saris and the half-spheres beneath her short sari-blouses’ (13) and her sensual scent are remarked upon whenever she is present. She has an enormous physical presence, for example: ‘Ayah’s presence galvanizes men to mad sprints in the afternoon heat’ (41). Whereas Lenny’s mother has a physical presence that is described as ‘motherliness’ (50) and Godmother has a physical presence that radiates stability due to her size and age, Ayah is what one would, in less academic language, call a sex bomb. Her natural sensuality fascinates Lenny and magnetically draws men to her: ‘their leaden eyes attracted to the magnet’ (27). The game of courtship that is played out between Ayah and the different men who compete for her favour is observed by Lenny, and teaches her about men and women, relationships and sexuality.

Ayah is, in many ways, a character who is ahead of her times. She has grown up in a society that expects young women to live in their parents’ home whilst waiting for an arranged marriage, but she still has left her home town of Amritsar to work as an ayah. This is probably because her family is in a difficult economical situation, needing their daughter to work for a living – little else would permit a young woman to go out to work. It is still interesting that Ayah has found work away from Amritsar, which takes her away from the protection of her family.

Not only is Ayah working for a living, but she also acts like a woman from a completely different class and time when it comes to men. In the 1940s, Indian women of the upper classes may have had some more freedom than lower-class women, and they may have been able to socialise with men at high society parties, sporting events and the like. This is mentioned by Carol in *The Pakistani Bride*, and although the main plot of *The Pakistani Bride* takes place fifteen years later, the somewhat larger freedom that upper-class women enjoyed would probably not have become radically altered in that short time. However, a woman of Ayah’s class, which must, given the economical necessity for her to work, be working-class

and middle caste, would not have these opportunities to socialise with men. That is, if she was living in her parents' home. Living away from her home environment permits Ayah to lead a social life that she could otherwise only dream of. Bringing Lenny with her as some sort of child chaperone, Ayah goes out alone into the city and explores the bazaars, the old monuments, the parks – and the possibilities for flirtation and love affairs that the city has to offer.

Ayah has drawn to her a motley group of admirers: Masseur, Ice-candy-man, a zoo attendant, a cook and so on. She meets her group when she takes Lenny into the city and they also come to visit her in the backyard of the Sethi house. The fact that Lenny's mother presumably has no idea that Lenny is coming along on these group dates across the city is something of a mystery, but also serves to show that Lenny's mother has a certain distance to the life that her daughter leads. Mother does, however, know that Ayah entertains guests in the backyard, because Ayah has been told that she is not allowed to meet her guests in the front garden. When Ayah meets her admirers, she is the natural centre of everyone's attention, although not the centre of the conversation. Her admirers compete to be the one with the funniest jokes, the most interesting news or fascinating stories. Ayah and Lenny form an appreciative audience, and the men are rewarded when 'Ayah becomes breathless laughing and almost rolls on the grass. Her sari slips off her shoulders and her admirers relish the brown gleam of her convulsed belly beneath her skimpy blouse, and the firm joggle of her rotund bosoms' (108).

Lenny is, as she says herself, educated in life by spending time with Ayah: 'The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me. Up and down, they look at her' (12). 'I learn also to detect the subtle exchange of signals and some of the complex rites by which Ayah's admirers coexist' (29). In addition to learning about the male gaze and adult courting rituals, Lenny also acts like Ayah's helper and chaperone, especially because 'things love to crawl beneath Ayah's sari. Ladybirds, glow-worms, Ice-candy-man's toes' (28). When the latter happens, Lenny is quick to protect her Ayah from the toes. While Ice-candy-man's clever toes are reprimanded for its activities, Masseur's fingers are welcomed by Ayah:

They are knowing fingers, very clever, and sometimes, late in the evening, when he and Ayah and I are alone, they massage Ayah under her sari. Her lids close. She grows still and languid. A pearly wedge gleams between her lips and she moans, a fragile, piteous sound of pleasure. Very carefully, very quietly, I maneuver my eyes and nose. It is dark, but now and then a dart of twilight illuminates a subtle artistry. My nose inhales the fragrance of earth and grass – and the other fragrance that distills insights. I intuit the meaning and purpose of things. The secret rhythms of creation and mortality. The essence of truth and beauty. I [...] discover that heaven has a dark fragrance. (28)

In this unorthodox way, Lenny gets some sort of sexual education, and learns things she would definitely never have learned in school.

Ayah has three admirers who are more steadfast than the rest of the group. Ice-candy-man is always around with a funny story or with news of the Partition process. Ayah is, however, not attracted to him, and his endeavours are not rewarded. Masseur is the other suitor who is always around. He is a member of the group of admirers from the start and during the first half of the novel he steadily grows closer to Ayah. Sharbat Khan is the third admirer. He is new in town, and since he is a tribal from the mountains, he brings with him something exotic that attracts Ayah from the start. His 'warm tiger eyes' are 'shining with love' and leave Ayah 'so short of breath' (85-6). Around him, Ayah is like a schoolgirl in love:

Ayah is nervous in his presence, given to sudden movement; her goddess-like calm replaced by breath-stopping shyness. They don't touch. He leans across his bicycle, talking, and she shifts from foot to foot, smiling, ducking and twisting spherically. She has taken to sticking a flower in her hair, plucked from our garden. They don't need to touch. His presence radiates a warmth that is different from the dark heat generated by Masseur's fingers – the lightening strikes of Ice-candy-man's toes. (84)

As far as one can trust Lenny's interpretation of the relations between these adults, it seems that Sharbat Khan and Ayah have a relationship based on mutual attraction, but where the interaction is innocent and non-physical. The possibility of falling in love also seems to be there, represented by the warmth that Sharbat Khan radiates. Masseur and Ayah, on the other hand, have a sexual relationship, represented by the dark heat, which can possibly be developed into a love relationship as well. The lightening strikes of Ice-candy-man's toes are insignificant to Ayah compared to the attraction she feels for the other two. Still, she fails to realise how strongly Ice-candy-man feels about her.

Lenny is not only a child chaperone to Ayah, she also has emotions connected with the game of courtship that is carried out in front of her. In the park, Lenny narrates: 'I lie on the grass, my head on Ayah's lap, basking in – and intercepting – the warm flood of stares directed at Ayah by her circle of admirers' (97). The fact that Lenny is 'basking' in the looks directed at Ayah, makes it seem that she feels that some of the looks are rubbing off on her, simply by being associated with Ayah.

She also feels her own attraction toward both Sharbat Khan and Masseur. When Sharbat Khan is looking at Ayah, Lenny feels like 'something happens within me. Though outwardly I remain as thin as ever, I can feel my stomach muscles retract to create a warm hollow' (86). Lenny has earlier said that she is educated by her time spent with Ayah and her

admirers and 'as if allowing her to learn heterosexuality by example, Ayah's body mediates Lenny's own sexual awakenings. A secret sharer in Ayah's adventures, Lenny shadows her sexual arousal' (Hai 397).

This is seen increasingly as the love story between Ayah and Masseur advances and Lenny gets caught in between Ayah and Masseur in a bewildering position of jealousy. When Ayah spends more and more time with Masseur, and the other admirers start dropping out of the group, Lenny of course comes along, and is witness to the courting between the two lovers: 'His voice is gravelly with desire and it makes something happen in my stomach, as when Sharbat Khan, radiant with love, ogles Ayah. I know Ayah is beyond speech – her will given over to a maestro's virtuosity. Masseur's consummate arm circles Ayah...' (128). Lenny is thus affected by the love scenes she witnesses, and 'something' happens in her stomach both when Sharbat Khan and Masseur communicate their attraction to Ayah. In some ways, Lenny seems to become Ayah by association. Being present in these private love scenes gives her more knowledge of adult sexuality than Ayah realises, and Lenny discovers yearnings of her own.

There is a last quiet duel between Sharbat Khan and Masseur when the first comes back from the mountains bringing nuts and fruit for Ayah. Masseur on the other hand offers Ayah a piece of *paan*:

Ayah looks at the succulent *paan*, plump with cardamom, and then at Masseur's mouth. Her face reflects an answer. And Sharbat Khan turns away his face, honorably conceding the ground.

Enough is enough! They have stared at each other and secretly communicated until Ayah's mouth is red with *paan*, and I am fit to scream. (162)

Lenny's jealousy becomes quite pronounced at this point in the story, but she seems unsure of who she is jealous of. She is a child, and in her way, she is in love with both Ayah and Masseur. The fact that they are 'secretly communicating' makes her feel left out as it is clear that the two adults do have something private between them that she is not permitted to participate in:

"You don't need to go anywhere," says Masseur, so assuredly possessive that I feel a stab of jealousy. "Why do you worry? I'm here. No one will touch a hair on your head. I don't know why you don't marry me!" he says, sighing persuasively. "You know I worship you..."

"I'm already yours," says Ayah with disturbing submission. "I will always be yours." "Don't you dare marry him!" I cry. "You'll leave me... Don't leave me," I beg, kicking Masseur. [...] I start sobbing. I kiss Ayah wherever Masseur is not touching her in the dark. (168)

Here Lenny first is jealous of Ayah, because she herself wants to be possessed by Masseur.

Hai puts it this way: 'Lenny demands service not only from Ayah's lover, but also from Ayah herself, desiring Ayah to redirect her lover's attentions to Lenny herself' (397). This redirecting of attention has been seen before, when Lenny thinks of the appreciative glances that Ayah gets, feeling that some of the attention is rubbing off on herself. Seconds later, however, she is jealous of Masseur, kicking him away from Ayah. Lenny then kisses Ayah 'wherever Masseur is not touching her in the dark.' This means that, in a way, Ayah is being doubly courted. She is courted by a grown man who has a sexual love for her, as well as by a girl, with the quite common infatuation and admiration for an older person of the same sex, which I think is experienced by many children. Ayah 'embodies a desirable adult femaleness that Lenny herself both ardently desires and desires to be' (Hai 397). Lenny is thus caught in-between wanting Ayah and wanting to become like her when she grows up.

Lenny is not only a voyeur when it comes to Ayah's relationships, but also to her parents' sexual relationship. Faking sleep, she is witness to her parents cuddling in the bed next to her, her father burying his face in her mother's breasts, and she thinks: 'having polio in infancy is like being born under a lucky star. It has many advantages – it permits me access to my mother's bed in the middle of the night' (20). It is, again, slightly disturbing that Lenny so obviously enjoys being close to these private sexual moments between adults that she knows. Her infatuation with Ayah and with some of Ayah's admirers explains her interest in their sexual relationships. When it comes to her parents, it seems that the happiness she gets from hearing the two of them enjoying each other has more to do with the tense nature of her parents' marriage than with the actual sexuality between them.

Lenny's mother and father speak less and less to each other as the story advances, and it seems that Father is drawing away from the family, possibly favouring the company of another woman, leaving Mother rejected behind. One day when Father comes home from work, he makes a joking comment to Mother, who is clinging to him in her usual way: 'Adi and I laugh and laugh and hug Father and our clinging mother. I feel deliriously lighthearted. So does Adi. Father has spoken directly to Mother: addressing her instead of the walls, furniture, ceiling – or using us as deflecting conduits to sound his messages off' (239). These little moments between her parents are treasured by Lenny, as happy contrasts to the silence and avoidance that normally dominate the family.

### Female Relationships

As has been shown above, Lenny has a physical closeness both to Ayah and Mother that is a bit unusual. Lenny is also very close to Godmother, and, much like the relationship between

Zaitoon and Miriam in *The Pakistani Bride*, the affection from the child is manifested in a physical way:

Flying forward I fling myself at Godmother and she lifts me onto her lap and gathers me to her bosom. I kiss her, insatiably, excessively, and she hugs me. She is childless. The bond that ties her strength to my weakness, my fierce demands to her nurturing, my trust to her capacity to contain that trust – and my loneliness to her compassion – is stronger than the bond of motherhood. More satisfying than the ties between men and women.

I cannot be in her room long without in some way touching her. Some nights, clinging to her broad white back like a bug, I sleep with her. She wears only white khaddar saris and white khaddar blouses beneath which is her coarse bandage-tight bodice. In all the years I never saw the natural shape of her breasts. (13)

Lenny describes Godmother as a sea mammal: She ‘moves to and fro, looking like an upended whale in her white sari with her sloping shoulders and broadening torso and the sari narrowing round her ankles. She has the same noble bearing and alert, accommodating air of that great mammal’ (150). Later, Lenny gets a glimpse of what Godmother may have looked like when she was young. ‘When Godmother comes out of her bath the next morning, [...] her dolphin shape wrapped in only her sari, one shoulder bare, hair dripping – all dewy and fresh – she looks like a dainty young thing. As if the water has whittled away her age’ (175). To Lenny, Godmother is an extra mother, providing a stable home environment and showering her with love and attention. When Mother is distant and troubled, Godmother is uncomplicated and provides a safe haven where Lenny is the centre of attention.

Godmother is a figure of stability, tradition and morality. She is someone who gives advice and who has connections all over Lahore. Godmother uses the power of her social standing to enforce traditions and the social hierarchy. Especially in relation to her younger sister, Godmother is a representative of the old view of women. Godmother’s younger sister, nicknamed Slavesister by Lenny, is not married, and has to live with her older sister and her husband, since an unmarried woman living alone is an impossible idea. When her parents failed to find her a husband, she probably lived several years as an unwanted guest in their house, and she now lives at the mercy of her older, married sister, as a servant and an intruder into her home. Sen comments: ‘Lenny’s besotted eyes cannot see the problems in Godmother’s relationship with her youngest sister, Slavesister, which reinforces the hierarchies of a master-slave dialectic. Godmother’s mistreatment of Slavesister [...] implies the worst excesses of Pakistani patriarchy’ (203).

Godmother, as a person with some knowledge of the world, could have chosen to treat Slavesister in a different way, but she is quite fiercely holding on to the traditional, patriarchal

view of an unmarried woman as worthless and an unwanted part of her family. The most telling scene in this respect is one towards the end of the novel, when Godmother is planning to donate blood to the hospital, and Slavesister 'says that she would also like to donate blood. Godmother is firm with her middle-aged kid sister. "No," she says, "you may kindly not donate your blood! I can't afford to have you go all faint and limp on me." Slavesister looks unutterably deprived' (222). This passage shows how Slavesister is living completely at Godmother's mercy, and how she does not even have the power to decide what to do with her own body.

### Puberty and a Sexual World

As the months pass, Lenny discovers the changes in her body, as puberty sets in. She also discovers an interest in boys and men that she has not been aware of before. From early on in the novel, Cousin has been more than normally interested in Lenny, and she sees him as one of her "teachers", guiding her in the mysterious ways of life. He shows her things: "Let me show you my scar," he offers, unbuttoning his fly and exposing me to the glamorous spectacle of a stitched scar and a handful of genitals. He too has clever fingers. "You can touch it," he offers' (29). As they both grow a bit older, Cousin becomes more and more explicit in his relationship with his younger cousin, and tells her that he is in love with her and wants to marry her one day. Lenny, who has just started to discover an interest in boys, is reluctant to take herself off the market so early. Cousin, trying to convince Lenny, kisses her, but she is not impressed, and concludes: 'Kissing, I'm convinced, is overrated' (153).

When Lenny rejects Cousin's advances, she recalls 'the bewildering longings the look on Masseur's face stirred in me when he looked at Ayah... And other stirrings...' (230) and she tells Cousin that "I think I found Masseur more attractive..." I surprise myself. Mouthing the words articulates my feelings and reveals myself to me' (230). After realising how she felt about Masseur, Lenny's eyes are opened: 'I look about me with new eyes. The world is athrob with men. As long as they have some pleasing attribute – height, width or beauty of face – no man is too old to attract me. Or too young' (231). Lenny points out all the men and boys she finds attractive, and Cousin concludes: "'You are attracted to roughly ten percent of the male population of Lahore.'" "Is that too much?" I enquire' (232).

In the same way as Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride*, Lenny has romantic daydreams of being taken away to the mountains by her lover – a fantasy most likely copied from the Bollywood love stories she has seen on the silver screen. The men:



all exert their compelling pull on my runaway fantasies in which I am recurrently spirited away to remote Himalayan hideouts; there to be worshipped, fought over, died for, importuned and wooed until, aroused to a passion that tingles from my scalp to the very tips of my fingers, I finally permit my lover to lay his hands upon my chest. It is no small bestowal of favor, for my chest is no longer flat. Two little bumps have erupted beneath my nipples. Flesh of my flesh, exclusively mine. And I am hard put to protect them. I guard them with a possessive passion [...]. Only I may touch them. [...] I can't trust anyone. Not even Mother who has taken to bathing me; and with her characteristic prim and solemn expression bunches her fingers round them and goes: "Pom-pom". (231)

Like Zaitoon, Lenny also feels pride and protectiveness when she discovers that her breasts are growing. Discovering that she is on her way to becoming a grown-up, she gets more self-assured: 'As the mounds beneath my nipples grow, my confidence grows. [...] I examine my chest in the small mirror hanging at an angle from the wall and play with them as with cuddly toys. [...] I feel assured that I will be quite attractive when I'm grown up' (231-2).

Mother's somewhat surprising behaviour at Lenny's bath time fits in with the rest of Lenny's world, which is a world where sexual overtones are found around every corner. Lenny's voyeurism, when it comes to her parents' and Ayah's sexual encounters, has been discussed earlier. Also, the old cook, Imam Din, is someone who today probably would have been charged with sexual assault. 'Ayah calls Imam Din the Catcher-in-the-kitchen. He sits in a corner on a wicker stool near the open pantry door and grabs anything soft that enters the kitchen. Sitting it, him, or her, on his lap he gently rocks' (57). Cousin's at first innocent attempts to win Lenny's heart escalate as the novel nears the end and can only be described as sexual assaults on a minor:

"Feel it," offers Cousin. I like its feel. It is warm and cuddly. As I squeeze the pliant flesh it strengthens and grows in my hand. "Hey!" I say. "What's this!" Cousin has a funny look in his eyes that I don't trust. "I have become a honeycomb," he says. "Lick me, here, and see what happens." I lick the tip gingerly. Nothing. No honey. "You've got to suck out the honey." Cousin arches his back and manoeuvres his penis to my mouth. "Suck it yourself!" I say, standing up. (172)

Lenny's ability to reject Cousin and get herself out of the situations that make her feel uncomfortable is perhaps what keeps her from feeling abused. On a different occasion, Cousin touches Lenny's breasts and, defending herself, she is 'slapping his hands till my palms sting, feeling sick and all shriveled up' (244). This is the only instance in which it seems that Cousin's behaviour is making an emotional impact on Lenny. Later, when Lenny asks Cousin what goes on in the Hira Mandi, he wants to show her instead of telling her, and after a struggle, 'pulling away my kicking feet from under me, [he] succeeds in de-knicking me. And putting his hand there, trembles and trembles...' (253). Lenny manages to get out of

all these situations, because she is confident and strong in her relationship with Cousin, and does not feel threatened by him. Cousin, on his side, although overly sexually charged, is not a violent person, and does not continue forcing his will upon her when Lenny says that enough is enough.

### Ayah's Body and the Partition of India

As Lenny discovers her body's first steps into puberty, the Partition of British India draws closer. The religious lines of battle are being drawn in politics, and more and more politicians argue in favour of religiously based nation states: India is designed as the new Hindu state, and Pakistan becomes the new Muslim state. Sikh claims for their own Khalistan are denied, and the Parsis await making their decision about where to turn when the land is divided. Simultaneously, tension is slowly rising in the group around Ayah, as the religious affinities of the members of the group become more and more pronounced.

In the first part of the novel, Ayah's 'chocolate chemistry' holds the group together, no matter what ethnicity, class or religion they belong to. It is no coincidence that Ayah's name, Shanta, means peace in Hindi. Other critics have seen Ayah as a symbol of the united India, and her body as a symbol of the land, desired by all religious and ethnic groups, that is about to be torn into pieces. I do not wish to go this far, but it is true that Ayah, in the eyes of her friends, becomes the embodiment of her religion. As Lenny observes, this is true not only of Ayah, but of all the people around her:

There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother's then? [...]  
I become aware of religious differences. It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves – and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindle into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah – she is also a token. A Hindu. (101)

The connection between the body, especially the female one, with the Partition of India is repeatedly seen as the partition process runs its course.

As quoted above, Lenny sees the transformation of Ayah in the eyes of her admirers, from 'all-encompassing' to 'a token'. It is especially the Muslim Ice-candy-man who starts focusing on her religious and ethnic background, asking her if she is Hindu, and enquiring why she wears saris instead of the traditional Punjabi shalwar-kamize. Ayah quickly eliminates the underlying political tension in his question by telling him that ayahs who wear saris get paid more than those who wear shalwar-kamizes, since the sari is associated with the

more educated ayahs from Goa. This is one of the many situations in which Ayah manages to keep the peace among her admirers and turn their discussion away from politics.

Still, when Partition is looming, there is nothing Ayah can do to keep the group together. One by one, her admirers leave the group to go to India, or they get caught up in their own problems and disappear. When the riots reach Lahore, Ice-candy-man unthinkingly takes Lenny and Ayah to watch from a rooftop. In the crowd of angry and violent men, they see that ‘a naked child, twitching on a spear stuck between her shoulders, is waved like a flag: her screamless mouth agape, she is staring up at me’ (144). Ice-candy-man is also the one who brings the shocking news when the first train filled with the dead bodies of Muslim refugees from Punjab reaches Lahore. In despair, he screams: “Everyone in it is dead! Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts!” (159). It is shown here, and it will be seen repeatedly later, that the violence of Partition was taken out most viciously on the bodies of women and children. The violence of the riots has a tremendous impact on Lenny and Ayah, and Ayah is for the first time seen in despair, hiding in a corner with her hands covering her face. This is probably the moment when she realises that her life will never be the same, and that she, as a woman and a Hindu, is in real danger in Lahore.

Not much later, Ayah’s lover Masseur is found murdered in the street. It is Lenny and one of the servants who find him. This is the only instance in the book, apart from the repeated mention of Lenny’s friend Ranna’s belly button, where the focus is on a man’s body:

He was lying on one side, the upper part of his velvet body bare, a brown and white checked lungi knotted on his hips, and his feet in the sack. I never knew Masseur was so fair inside, creamy, and his arms smooth and distended with muscles and his forearms lined with pale brown hair. A wide wedge of flesh was neatly hacked to further trim his slender waist, and his spine, in a velvet trough, dipped into his lungi. The minute I touched his shoulder, thinking he might open his eyes, I knew he was dead. But there was too much vigor about him still... and his knowing tapering fingers with their white crescents and trimmed nails appeared pliant and ready to assert their consummate skill. [...] He has been reduced to a body. A thing. One side of his handsome face already buried in the dusty sidewalk. (185-186)

This passage shows the grotesque beauty of Masseur’s dead body, and serves as a reminder that, even though women were the ones who suffered the most gruesome violence during Partition, men’s bodies were also butchered and mutilated in the name of honour, revenge and religion.

Earlier in the novel, Lenny has been a voyeur of Ayah’s affairs, desiring Ayah herself, but also desiring to be Ayah. After the loss of Masseur, Lenny still lives vicariously through

Ayah, sharing in her sorrow. The scenes where the two are walking aimlessly through Lahore also show Lenny's desire to comfort Ayah and to possess her – something she knows she cannot do:

Masseur's death has left in her the great empty ache I know sometimes when the muscles of my stomach retract around hungry spaces within me... but I know there is an added dimension to her loss I cannot comprehend. I know at least that my lover lies somewhere in the distant and possible future: I have hope. (188)

And holding the end of her sari in her hands like a supplicant, she buries her unbearable ache in her hands. I stroke her hair. I kiss her ears, feeling my inadequacy. (189)

[Ice-candy-man] follows us everywhere as we walk, hand in hand, two hungry wombs... Impotent mothers under the skin. (189)

The tragic end of the love affair between Ayah and Masseur has been foretold through the folk tales that Ayah tells Lenny. The tale of Sohni and Mahiwal and the story of Heer and Ranja are central in Punjabi folklore, and well known by both young and old. These are typical examples of tragic folktales where lovers try to reach out across social, economical or religious borders, and end up separated or most often dead.

Mother, on the other hand, tells Lenny the real life story of Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, and his wife. Jinnah was Muslim and his wife was Parsi – an unthinkable marriage. Lenny is looking at a picture of her and thinks:

For the lady in the photograph is daring: an Indian woman baring her handsome shoulders in a strapless gown in an era when such unclothing was considered reprehensible. Defying, at eighteen, her wealthy knighted father, braving the disapproval of their rigid community, excommunicated, she marries a Muslim lawyer twenty-two years older than her. Jinnah was brilliant, elegantly handsome: he had to be to marry such a raving beauty. And cold, too, he had to be – to win such a generous heart. [...] "She died at twenty-nine. Her heart was broken..."

Her daring to no account. Her defiance humbled. Her energy extinguished. Only her image in the photograph and her innocence – remain intact.' (170-171)

This story of a young woman, daring to go against the rules and traditions of her community to live her life the way she wanted is a clear parallel to Ayah and her life choices. The fact that Jinnah's wife did not achieve the happiness she wished for and in the end has her 'defiance humbled' and her 'energy extinguished' points to what is going to happen to Ayah later in the novel.

When Partition is a fact and trains filled with butchered refugees start the rapid escalation of fear, violence and panic on both sides of the new border, violence comes also to the hitherto peaceful and untouched neighbourhood of the Sethi family. A mob of Muslim

men come to their house, looking for Ayah. She never made a secret of being Hindu in front of her group of admirers, and now they have turned against her – perhaps in jealousy, first killing Masseur and then coming to get her as well. Mother and the servants stand firm in front of the mob, telling them that Ayah has left for India. Tragically, Lenny with her ‘truth-infected’ (196) tongue ends up betraying Ayah’s hiding place when Ice-candy-man uses their old friendship to gain her trust:

They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet – that want to move backwards – are forced forwards instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth. [...] The last thing I noticed was Ayah, her mouth slack and piteously gaping, her disheveled hair flying into her kidnappers’ faces, staring at us as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes. (194-5)

This passage points back to the first glimpse Lenny got of the reality of the partition riots, and the little girl pierced on a spear that was carried triumphantly through the streets of Lahore. This quick backward look in the middle of the kidnapping scene serves as a reminder that similar things are happening in countless homes all over Punjab, and that Ayah is one of many.

#### Violence against Women during Partition

The background and escalation of the violence of Partition is shown through Ice-candy-man’s news reports and the kidnapping of Ayah. Still, the most violently realistic account of the Partition violence comes from Ranna. The narrative perspective changes from Lenny to Ranna when the realities of Partition catch up with his peaceful village. This makes his story stand out, since this is the only time in the novel when the focaliser is not Lenny. Ranna’s village is taken by surprise by a large mob of Sikhs, probably coming to revenge the burning of their own village, and Ranna is most likely the only survivor after the attack. The men and boys of the village hear the women and girl’s cries of pain and terror before they themselves are slaughtered by the mob. Ranna is hidden underneath the dead bodies of the men and boys of his family for hours and when he wakes up he sees glimpses of what has happened to the women and girls in his village:

Every time his eyes open the world appears to them to be floating in blood. From the direction of the mosque come the intolerable shrieks and wails of women. [...] Once he thought he saw his eleven-year-old sister, Khatija, run stark naked into their courtyard: her long hair disheveled, her boyish body bruised, her lips cut and swollen and a bloody scab where her front teeth were missing. (213)

Ranna also witnesses atrocities committed against strangers on his journey to the safety of Pakistan:

No one minded the semi-naked specter as he looked in doors with his knowing, wide-set peasant eyes as men copulated with wailing children - old and young women. He saw a naked woman, her light Kashmiri skin bruised with purple splotches and cuts, hanging head down from a ceiling fan. And looked on with a child's boundless acceptance and curiosity as jeering men set her long hair on fire. He saw babies, snatched from their mothers, smashed against walls and their howling mothers brutally raped and killed. (218-9)

These scenes are examples of how the bodies of women and children got the most brutal treatment from the enemy in the religious and ethnic conflict during Partition. In ethnic conflicts, violence is more often taken out on civilians than in military conflicts. The urge to humiliate the enemy people and to try to extinguish their ethnicity results in women being the main target of violence. Raping women serves to humiliate their men, and by impregnating the enemy women, the enemy's ethnicity will become washed out, as the rapists' ethnicity will put its mark on the children resulting from the rapes. This strategy is enforced when the conflict takes place in a society where, as has been discussed before, women are burdened with embodying the men's honour.

In the house next to the Sethis, the government sets up a camp for women who have been kidnapped, raped and abused by the enemy, and who have escaped. The close proximity of the camp to Lenny's home makes it a natural focus of curiosity and concern for her. She sees the Sikh guard outside the compound, and rationalises that the camp is a prison for women. Later, she gets a new ayah, because Mother has decided to employ one of the women from the camp. That's when she learns that the women are not criminals, but 'fallen women'. Hamida, the new ayah, bears some resemblance to Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride*. She is described like this:

And, when idle, in fluttering panic [her hands] reach out and massage whoever is at hand. [...] She is like a starved and grounded bird and I can't bear to hurt her. Sometimes her eyes fill and the tears roll down her cheeks. Once, when I smoothed her hair back, she suddenly started to weep, and noticing my consternation explained, "When the eye is wounded, even a scented breeze hurts." (205)

The images of birds that the description of Hamida evokes are very similar to those of Zaitoon, and their situations are not very different. The passages describing the women in the camp and Hamida not only points back to *The Pakistani Bride*, but also back to other dramatic periods of history: 'they beat their breasts and cry: "Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!"' reflecting the history of their cumulative sorrows and the sorrows of their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and

Rajput great-grandmothers who burnt themselves alive rather than surrender their honor to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses' (285). This way of linking the women in the novel with women of the past has been pointed out in the analysis of *The Pakistani Bride* as well. By bringing up crimes committed against women at other times, Sidhwa not only treats the period when the novel is set, but also seems to want the reader to take in the whole scope of female suffering in India and Pakistan throughout history.

Lenny understands that Hamida has experienced horrible things, and wants to know more specifically what has happened to the women in the camp. But when she asks Godmother, she does not get a satisfying answer:

“Hamida was kidnapped by the Sikhs, [...] She was taken away to Amritsar. Once that happens, sometimes, the husband – or his family – won't take her back.”

“Why? It isn't her fault she was kidnapped!”

“Some folk feel that way – they can't stand their women being touched by other men.” It's monstrously unfair: but Godmother's tone is accepting. (227)

As has been seen earlier, Godmother does not represent a challenge to the status quo of her society. She later makes an exception to save Ayah, but overall, she has come to terms with the society she lives in, and does not feel a need to use her power to make changes. Lenny has earlier had a nightmare which can be linked to this attitude of Godmother's:

Children lie in a warehouse. Mother and Ayah move about solicitously. The atmosphere is businesslike and relaxed. Godmother sits by my bed smiling indulgently as men in uniforms quietly slice of a child's arm here, a leg there. She strokes my head as they dismember me. I feel no pain. Only an abysmal sense of loss – and a chilling horror that no one is concerned by what's happening. (31)

The fact that the women Lenny loves and trusts are working together with the soldiers to mutilate the children is connected to the way in which women are often the upholders of patriarchal practices that limit and control the lives of women and children. As Asha Sen points out in her essay 'Child Narrators', the 'sense of female ineffectuality is reflected in Lenny's dreams where she sees herself as the victim of male brutality even as the women she loves – her mother, Godmother and Ayah – collaborate with the men in their perpetration of violence' (5). This has been mentioned earlier, and it is obviously a hidden fear of Lenny's, that the women that are closest to her will not protect her when she needs it. Godmother does show a capability for change when she rescues Ayah, and Mother goes even further, which will be discussed later on. No matter what Godmother and Mother do, Lenny refuses to let grown-ups silence her with their accepting attitude and dismissive comments. She asks questions, and demands answers. If the answer is not logical, she notices, and decides to make up her own mind about what's right and wrong.

### Prostitution and Ayah's Marriage

The subject of prostitution and the description of Hira Mandi, Lahore's prostitution district, were discussed at some length in Chapter Two. *Cracking India* also visits Hira Mandi, and the area is seen in different lights, according to the character who talks about it. To Ice-candy-man, Hira Mandi is a place of talented singers, dancers, musicians and poets. He is from the area himself, and prides himself with the fact that the neighbourhood was once built to house the concubines and illegitimate children of the Mughal princes, which means that its residents have royal ancestry, however illegitimate. In his view, the girls are well protected by the men who live and work in Hira Mandi, and he sees them as 'beautiful princesses who command fancy prices for their singing and dancing skills!' (259). Lenny walks through Hira Mandi with Godmother in their search for Ayah, and she sees the 'reverse side of the tinsel', as Qasim thinks in *The Pakistani Bride*, when the poverty of the place is exposed in the daylight. She also notices that the girls who are standing around in the streets are not like the girls she knows – they dress and act differently. When she asks Cousin about it, she is persuaded to see Hira Mandi, or the Kotha, in much the same light as Ice-candy-man. Cousin explains:

The Kotha is the cultural pulse of the city. [...] The girls are taught to sing and dance and talk elegantly and look pretty and be attractive to men. It sound very much like a cross between a Swiss finishing school a female cousin of mine in Bombay was sent to and a School for the Fine and Performing Arts. [...] I'm beginning to understand. The pimps are a kind of adult and mercantile cupid. [...] But all this still doesn't explain the twittering flap and the hush-hush any mention of the Hira Mandi evokes. Or the contempt in which everybody appears to hold this Institute of Culture. ...Or the girls who looked too at ease loitering in the Mandi gullies and lacked the docile modesty of properly brought up Muslim girls.' (279)

From the all-male view of the prostitution district in *The Pakistani Bride*, *Cracking India* comes a lot closer to exposing the reality lived behind the façades and to questioning the practice and the male view of it.

Godmother uses her links to find Ice-candy-man, and learns what has happened to Ayah. Ice-candy-man has been her pimp, selling her as a dancing girl for months, until recently, when he married her. Godmother confronts him, and, little by little, she crushes his explanations and his opinion that Ayah has come to no harm. Lenny listens in on this conversation that takes place without either participant heeding her presence. She is constantly torn between pitying Ice-candy-man and agreeing with Godmother in her condemnation of him. Being raised in a society where men are trusted and men are the ones in charge, both of the larger society and of the family, Lenny has been taught to trust in men.



Her trust in Ice-candy-man led to Ayah's abduction, and now, again, Ice-candy-man's eyes are making her pity him and believe that he is really sorry for what he has done:

The longer I look at him the more willing am I to be beguiled by those tearing, forlorn eyes. How long have they been like that? When I think of Ayah I think she must get away from the monster who has killed her spirit and mutilated her "angel's" voice. And when I look at Ice-candy-man's naked humility and grief I see him as undeserving of his beloved's heartless disdain. (276)

The way Lenny is still willing to see Ayah as Ice-candy-man's beloved and see him as relenting shows how much she wants to believe that he is capable of responsibility and dignity.

As the conversation goes on, Lenny does, however, slowly start realising what has happened to Ayah. 'They have shamed her. Not those men in the carts – they were strangers – but Sharbat Khan and Ice-candy-man and Imam Din and Cousin's cook and the butcher and the other men she counted among her friends and admirers' (266). Understanding how the upheaval of Partition has turned these former friends of Ayah into the same ones who have 'shamed her' and destroyed her life, changes for ever the way Lenny sees the world:

The innocence that my parents' vigilance, the servants' care and Godmother's love sheltered in me, that neither Cousin's carnal cravings, nor the stories of the violence of the mobs, could quite destroy, was laid waste that evening by the emotional storm that raged round me. The confrontation between Ice-candy-man and Godmother opened my eyes to the wisdom of righteous indignation over compassion. To the demands of gratification – and the unscrupulous nature of desire. To the pitiless face of love. (264)

Lenny sees how Ice-candy-man has given in to his desire to possess Ayah's body and has ended up mistreating her. She also sees how Godmother is right not to show him any mercy, but Lenny herself is still torn in her perception of him. No matter how strongly Godmother argues her point, Lenny still seems to believe that it is love that has led Ice-candy-man to act like he did. The fact that she sees love as 'pitiless' is a sign that she has lost the girlhood fantasies of the perfect, romantic love.

Godmother and Lenny go to see Ayah in her new home with Ice-candy-man. In Lenny's eyes, she, who used to be all 'chocolate chemistry', is now fit out in a costume, which is hiding the natural beauty of her body, face and hair:

Where have the radiance and the animation gone? Can the soul be extracted from its living body? Her vacant eyes are bigger than ever: wide-opened with what they've seen and felt [...] Colder than the ice that lurks behind the hazel in Ice-candy-man's beguiling eyes. [...] I move awkwardly into the voluminous skirt of her brocade garara. And through the prickling brocade and silver lame of her kamize at last feel the soft and rounded contours of her diminished flesh. She buries her head in me and buries me in all her finery: and in the dark and musky attar of her perfume. (272-273)

The layers of fabric covering Ayah brings the reader's thoughts back to Papoo's forced marriage, where Papoo was described as a heap of clothes. Her eyes and 'diminished flesh' as well as all the make-up, perfume and jewellery serve to underline the change wrought in Ayah in the months since she was kidnapped. Lenny can feel that she is irrevocably changed. The change is most of all seen in her eyes and heard in her voice – the only things that Ice-candy-man has not been able to camouflage with bridal clothing. Her eyes are wide and have a desperate look, and her voice is harsh and unrecognisable. Despite seeing the state that Ayah is in, and hearing her ask for help to escape, Godmother still tries to convince Ayah to stay with her rapist husband. Godmother has gone far outside her normal range of behaviour confronting Ice-candy-man, and being an upholder of tradition, she tries to persuade Ayah to stay in her marriage, arguing that anything can be forgiven. Ayah, however, does not let herself be forced into staying.

Ambreen Hai in her article 'Border Work, Border Trouble' sees the fate of Ayah and the way she is found as entirely according to the rules of patriarchy: 'Her fate after rape is to be found or to be packed off by other women, not to act but to be acted upon. There can be no "life after rape" or accession to subjecthood for Ayah in Sidhwa's text' (404-5). I think it is useful to compare the scene where Godmother finds Ayah to the scene in *The Pakistani Bride* where Mushtaq finds Zaitoon and carries her over the bridge. The scenes have many similarities, but the differences are significant.

While Zaitoon was found by a man of authority, a representative of patriarchy, Ayah is found by a woman. Even more significantly: While Zaitoon did not have a word to say when plans were laid for her future, Ayah gets to speak. She does not say much, and the reader does not see the story from her perspective, but she does get to say what she wants: "I want to go to my family" and "I will not live with him." Conscious of the fact that her family might not take her in, Ayah still makes her own decision to go back to Amritsar, and Godmother and Mother help her cross the border to India. Whether her family will accept her or not is not known at the end of the story, but sadly, women who had been raped were most often unwanted by their families.

The fact that Ayah is found and helped by women is significant, but to Hai it is negative because Ayah does not find her own way out of her forced marriage. Similarly, Hai does not recognise the fact that Ayah *speaks*. The fact that she is given a voice and that her voice is heard, is an *important* step forward from *The Pakistani Bride*, where there really was 'no "life after rape" or accession to subjecthood' (405) for Zaitoon. Sidhwa's feminism and hopes for the future have changed from her first novel to her third one.

The partition rapes and the rape of Ayah have been discussed at length by Hai. She does a postcolonial Marxist feminist reading of *Cracking India*, and puts Sidhwa's treatment of rape into a class perspective. Hai argues that the rape of Ayah 'becomes a decoy that disallows the surfacing of other issues – such as the rapes and abductions of Muslim women by Muslim men, or of *upper* class women – that may be perhaps much more disturbing to Pakistani readers' (400). She goes on to ask 'if Sidhwa's narrative seeks to correct earlier omissions by representing the violence perpetrated upon women as a casualty of decolonization, then why does it halt at representing only lower-class violence?' (401). As Hai mentions, there was a public silence covering the violence done to women during and in the aftermath of Partition. In later years, the subject has been taken up again, but, as Hai points out, there may still be omissions in the debate. The readers of Sidhwa's fiction would mostly be educated middle- and upper-class women. Restricting the descriptions of the rapes to lower class women and making sure the rape involves people from enemy groups or religions may make the subject easier to deal with for the reader.

That being said, Hai does not take into account the fact that Ayah's admirers were of three different religions: Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. The Sikh Sher Singh leaves Lahore before the abduction of Ayah, and the Hindus make a symbolic conversion to Islam to avoid being murdered or converted by the sword. Still, when Lenny assumes that Ayah's former friends have used her while she was forced into prostitution, this means that both Muslims and former Hindus took part in the rapes of her Hindu body.

Moreover, where does Hai find the evidence that no upper-class women are raped in the novel? In Ranna's village, Ranna hears the screams of the mullah's daughter. The mullah, as their religious leader, would be the most respected man in the village. Even though they live in the countryside, his is a position of power and thus his family is a respected family. The rape of his daughter must then qualify as the rape of a person, perhaps not upper-class, but at least of higher social standing. The women Ranna sees being abused on his walk through Lahore may be upper-, middle- or working-class. There are no clues as to their status. The same is valid for the women in the camp next door to the Sethi house. Their backgrounds are never spoken of.

Hai makes the same point when it comes to the rapists: '[T]he text also turns to the comfort of positioning lower-class men (of any ethnicity) as always and only sexually threatening figures – a potential rapist in every one' (406). This would have been an excellent point to argue about *The Pakistani Bride*, where lower-class potential rapists seem to lurk around every corner or bend in the road. In the case of *Cracking India*, I am, however,

reluctant to agree with Hai's point. In *Cracking India*, there are three sexually threatening male characters: Ice-candy-man, Imam Din and Cousin. Father may also be added to this list, had we known more of the nature of Mother's bruises. In the novel there are also numerous rapists and violent men, but they never become characters. Among the three sexually threatening characters only Ice-candy-man is a rapist, but Imam Din is described as a potential sexual perpetrator, discreetly masturbating with a child, woman or pet in his lap. Cousin repeatedly tries to have sexual intercourse with Lenny, without her really realising what is going on, and he would have become a rapist had she not been so apt at removing herself from threatening situations. Ice-candy-man and Imam Din represent the lower class rapist Hai is talking about. Cousin, however, lives in a wealthy suburban neighbourhood in a house filled with servants, in an upper-middle-class household. This once again shows that Hai's Marxist reading of *Cracking India* tends to see only what it wants to see.

#### The Female World and Acts of Resistance

The female world plays a smaller part in *Cracking India*, compared to the secluded world of the women as described in *The Pakistani Bride*. Generally, Lenny socialises with both women and men, although her primary caregivers are women. There is, however, a female community in the novel, and this becomes more and more active as the novel progresses. In a traditional and patriarchal society, especially Mother and Electric-Aunt, but also Godmother and Ayah, perform their own acts of independence. Mother, Electric-Aunt and Godmother all search for Ayah after she gets kidnapped, although it is Godmother who goes to find her when they discover her whereabouts. Simultaneously, Mother and Electric-Aunt smuggle petrol to Hindu and Sikh families around Lahore, to help them escape over the border to India. The women are also engaged in the work to recover women who have been abducted and abused, and Mother hires one of these women to work as an ayah in her home.

These different acts are performed apart from the male community. Mother and Electric-Aunt run their operation themselves, and Father has no part in what is going on. Asha Sen comments that Mother and Electric-Aunt's sudden independence 'suggests a strength and resilience outside the bounds of patriarchal subservience' (203). These are women who normally live within the rules of patriarchy, something which is exemplified by Mother and Father's marriage, where Mother is clearly the weaker and subjugated party. The unsettling of their society during the riots and political unrest allows Mother and Electric-Aunt to step outside the boundaries normally encasing them, and to act on their own. During the Second

World War, women in Europe enjoyed a similar professional and spatial freedom, although on a larger scale.

Mother and Electric-Aunt are not punished for their acts of resistance, but one can say that Ayah is. Some critics have seen Ayah as a symbol of the united India, and her abduction and rape as an image of the tearing apart of the country. Sujala Singh argues:

In *Cracking India*, Ayah's betrayal and rape not only fractures the multi-religious group but also signifies the manner in which the fragmentation of nation(s) gets actualised. The traditional iconography of Mother India in nationalist discourse was cast in the idiom of the virtuous woman as the guardian of the domain of the nationalist soul. In ironic contrast, the "unity in diversity" depicted in the working class world is centered around Ayah's body, and the narrative's indulgence of her sexuality is voyeuristic. At the end of the novel, Ayah's sexuality, once depicted as the core of a plural social micro-world, is brutalised as she is abducted and raped to satisfy the lust of sectarian nationalists. (16)

Thus, Ayah becomes a symbol of united India, with her femininity as the force that holds all the different religions and ethnicities together. When the country is torn apart by sectarian nationalists, her body, representing the country, is violated. In this way, Ayah *becomes* India - her female body becomes the feminised land that the men fight over. This reading seems odd in some ways, as Mother India is traditionally portrayed as a virtuous upper-caste Hindu woman. Ayah is in many ways far from this image. More importantly, from a feminist viewpoint this reading of Ayah's body as the land of India plays along with the patriarchal system that *Cracking India* sets out to criticise. The common comparison of land to the female body has to do with conquest, ownership, fertilisation and colonisation – an image of the female body far from what feminism wants to promote.

To a feminist, Ayah's own actions prior to being abducted are far more interesting than the land-body parallel. Before the kidnapping, Ayah lives a life with an unusual amount of freedom to socialise, flirt and have sex. She has total control of her physical whereabouts and enjoys a freedom of movement granted to few women in her country. She determines who she wants to spend time with, and she is the one laying down the rules for how to socialise in her group of friends. She even refuses to marry the man with whom she is having sex – a quite unthinkable scenario in her society. Ayah is able to negotiate this lifestyle, because of the absence of parents or relatives who might have stopped her. As has been pointed out earlier in this chapter, Ayah is a woman ahead of her time and class. Her choice to live her life the way she wants makes her very attractive to the men with whom she socialises, but when she chooses one of them over the others, the life she has built starts to unravel.

In the midst of the upheaval and riots of Partition, it is easy for jealous former friends of Ayah to kill Masseur and to have her abducted. Heated emotions, religious enmity and an increased focus on the virtue of women as a source of ethnic and religious pride mix and ultimately push Ayah's former friends and suitors to kidnap Ayah. The abduction is more a punishment for Ayah's life choices than it is a religious or political act. Under the cover of Partition, the rejected suitors, especially Ice-candy-man, get their revenge. The men who have spent months, perhaps years, competing for Ayah's favour and who were rejected when she chose Masseur, now get a chance to have sex with her when Ice-candy-man forces her into prostitution. The abduction and forced prostitution put Ayah back in her place as subordinate. She, who has dared to live a life breaking boundaries and defying patriarchal rules of female conduct, is violently forced back into submission and in the end into marriage.

There are few men in *Cracking India* who stand up for the women who are being mistreated. A few of the servants in Lenny's house try to protect Ayah when the mob comes for her, and the same men are concerned with her well-being when she is found and installed in the camp for recovered women. The man who most forcefully shows his humanity and compassion is, however, the guard outside the gate to the camp. He is one of the few Sikhs left in Lahore after Partition, and he is responsible for the security of women of all religions. When Ice-candy-man is hovering outside the camp, the guard beats him up, and after the other men have stopped him, he yells: 'Let anyone touch the women... See what I'll do to their cocks and balls! They are my sisters and mothers!' (284), proving that not all men and not all people were part of the violence of the riots.

### Through Women's Eyes

In the previously mentioned confrontation between Godmother and Ice-candy-man, Godmother is victorious. As Asha Sen puts it: It is 'Godmother's gaze that finally demolishes the perpetrators of the deed' (204). Sen's choice of words here is crucial. In *Cracking India* the male gaze has a powerful impact on the women, their lives and their fate. The male gaze is the reason behind the practice of purdah. It also causes the feeling of discomfort at being looked at that is repeatedly experienced by the women. The male gaze also affects the outcome of the novels. In the last part of *Cracking India*, however, the male gaze is challenged by the stare of female eyes. Godmother breaks Ice-candy-man's confident exterior with her gaze. He goes from being the one with the power to look at and to command to being the one who is looked at and commanded.

Here, I avoid naming Godmother's look 'the female gaze', simply because the male gaze is normally seen as an objectifying and sexualising way of looking at women. A female gaze would thus be a way for women to objectify men, but that is not what Godmother is doing here. She is seeing the world for herself, and using the power of her knowledge to bend Ice-candy-man's will. She is looking at the world with female eyes. This may seem banal, but in a society based on the practice of purdah, women do not necessarily see the world. Hindu women in purdah are supposed to lower their eyes whenever there is a man in the room, even if the man is of their own family. Muslim women who wear a burkha cannot see much through the netting covering the eyes. Women must at all times make sure not to meet a man's eye, and women living in the zenana do not see much of the world outside their walls. In this context, the simple act of looking, or looking straight at something, in itself becomes a challenge to patriarchy.

Before Partition was carried out, Lenny met Gandhi when he visited Lahore. The meeting was a mixed experience for Lenny:

He is a man who loves women. And lame children. And the untouchable sweeper – so he will love the untouchable sweeper's constipated girl-child best. I know just where to look for such a child. He touches my face, and in a burst of shyness I lower my eyes. This is the first time I have lowered my eyes before man.

It wasn't until some years later – when I realized the full scope and dimension of the massacres – that I comprehended the concealed nature of the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi's non-violent exterior.

And then, when I raised my head again, the men lowered their eyes. (96)

As a child, Lenny is lured into accepting Gandhi as a loving and peaceful leader. The way he combines the authority of a man with the mild and non-violent behaviour that Lenny associates with women makes it easy for Lenny to trust him. Under his hypnotic gaze she lowers her eyes – and gives him her trust and respect. This is a parallel scene to the one where Ice-candy-man uses his gaze to make Lenny reveal Ayah's hiding place.

When she grows older, Lenny gathers her own knowledge about the violence that erupted from the political games played by Gandhi and the other leaders in India. Her knowledge gives her the confidence to see through Gandhi and she realises how her earlier trust in all men as trustworthy authority figures has been misled. Confident in her knowledge of the truth of what happened during Partition, Lenny raises her head again. She looks directly at the world and the knowledge and pride in her eyes conquers the male gaze. This is a description of Lenny's epiphany or moment of growing up. It is also the narrator's way of urging women to use the power of knowledge to gain respect in a male-dominated society. Sen puts it this way:

Lenny's gaze displaces male identity as it reverses the male gaze which seeks to situate her as "lack" to its wholeness, as for instance, in the case where the Parsi priest shrinks from taking her hand for fear that she may be menstruating and consequently, unclean. Sidhwa seeks to address this repudiation of the female body by presenting a collaboration of women that rejects the male gaze. (204)

Most prominent among these women who reject the male gaze is Ayah, but the other female characters of the novel also challenge the male gaze. Godmother, Mother and Electric-Aunt all move outside the constrictions of a gender segregated society. At the end of the novel, Lenny is the one who is going to continue looking squarely at the male dominated world with her observant eyes.



## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

#### The Eyes that See

This thesis set out to do a close reading of *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* in order to shed light on the ways in which the image of the female body is used and in what ways this image represents the feminist message of the novels. The close readings revealed many similarities between the novels treatment of the female body, but also interesting developments that take place in Sidhwa's feminism from *The Pakistani Bride* of the 1970s to *Cracking India* of the 1980s.

#### Patriarchy and the Challenge of Unveiling

Both *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* give important insights into the patriarchal system of oppression of the female body. Through the childhood and early teenage experiences of Zaitoon and Lenny, the novels expose how the lives of the female protagonists are determined by their sex. Both girls have their education cut short because of their female bodies. Zaitoon is taken out of school when she starts menstruating. Lenny is only sent to school for a few months before she is taken out for good, because of her disability. One may argue that Lenny's disability has nothing to do with her female body, but had she been a boy, she would not have been taken out of school. The doctor grounds his recommendation on the fact that she has no need for an education, since her sex means that she will get married and have children – not go on to have a career.

In *The Pakistani Bride* the women are living under a constant threat from the male society outside the women's quarters. The system designed to keep women secluded is a combination of threat from the outside male stranger, who is seen as likely to harass or rape, and the inside threat of female sexuality, which is seen as unstable, unreliable and likely to respond to *any* male body. As was discussed in depth in the beginning of Chapter Two, this system reinforces itself, as men and women never learn how to socialise in a non-sexual fashion. The threat from the outside is felt both by Carol and Zaitoon. Zaitoon has been raised to shield herself from it, while Carol painfully learns how the threat of the male gaze chips away pieces of her self worth.

Direct and indirect veiling of the female body is supposed to keep the women safe from the threat of the stranger, or male society in general. Zaitoon wears a shawl to cover her

head and upper body and, according to tradition, she is supposed to live her entire life in the company of women in the zenana. Still, she sleeps in the same room as her father up until her marriage, something which is seen as inappropriate by her surrogate mother Miriam. When she is married to Sakhi, she spends her time with the other women of the family, but since the family lives in the mountains there is no zenana. Purdah is rather carried out by the women having to stay in their family's village in order not to be seen by strangers.

Zaitoon breaks with the system of veiling from the start of her marriage. She walks alone away from the village and waves to some soldiers driving a military truck. Even though she keeps her head covered doing all this, it is still considered unveiling by the tribal family that she has married into. Sakhi punishes her for this impropriety by beating her up severely. When Zaitoon runs away from the village, she knows that she is moving into a threatening landscape, unprotected, out of purdah and virtually unveiled, even though her head is still covered. During her walk in the mountains, Zaitoon is in a way liberated, and throws her shawl off her head, letting go of all her inhibitions.

Ayah in *Cracking India* is also liberating herself from purdah. She has done it before the novel starts by moving away from the protection of her family. In a surprisingly modern way, she manages to live an unveiled life for years, walking the city streets alone, socialising, flirting and having sex. What is remarkable about Ayah is that her whole social life happens on her terms and the men abide by her rules. Lenny learns this unveiling by Ayah's example, and as Ayah's child chaperone she enjoys a freedom experienced by few other girls.

These unveilings performed by Zaitoon, Ayah and Lenny are clear challenges to the patriarchal system. The system is designed to make women fear freedom, but these women all seek freedom out in spite of their fear. For Zaitoon, her decision to run away from her marriage and make herself a social outcast is rapidly punished by the patriarchal system. After only a few days' freedom, she is raped by two strangers, precisely because she is unveiled, unprotected, outside the safe boundaries of the symbolic zenana of her husband's village. The system sees her as having voluntarily forfeited her right to respect and human treatment. The brutal rape is a punishment for trying to make her own decisions in life.

In *Cracking India*, Ayah is also punished for her unveiled lifestyle. As in the case of Zaitoon, the punishment from the patriarchal society is taken out on her body. Ayah's female body has broken the rules and wrought rivalry between the men in her group of friends. When the opportunity presents itself, Ayah's former "friends" carry out their punishment for her modern lifestyle choices. As in the case of Zaitoon, the punishment is rape. While perhaps

less brutal, the multiple rapes and forced prostitution of Ayah's body are all the more emotionally humiliating, since the rapes are carried out by men that she used to trust.

*The Pakistani Bride* ends with an almost total demolition of the female rebellion that took place in form of Zaitoon's unveiling and Carol's questioning of the patriarchal traditions. The novel's plot is circular: It starts out with patriarchal control, shows the reader the challenge to patriarchy performed by Zaitoon and Carol, and then returns to patriarchal control in the end. Carol has tried to live a modern and sexually liberated life on the edge of Pakistani society. She has had ideas about women uniting against male oppression, but she has to give up and extract herself from the community and from her marriage in order to preserve her own sense of self. She literally has to remove her body from the influence of patriarchal society, or else she will be broken down.

Zaitoon has tried to take control of the course of her life and of her own body, but her rebellion of unveiling has not brought her much closer to liberation. Not only has she been raped, but she has also lost her family, her identity within the community and any chance of belonging in the future. She will live a life as a social outcast, something which is especially hard in a society where, in the eyes of others, your family defines who you are. The end of the novel sees her body being carried away – the person Zaitoon is no longer there to give her perspective. She and her body exist only at the mercy of Major Mushtaq and other men whose hands she will pass into in the future.

*The Pakistani Bride* is a deeply pessimistic work, focusing on female suffering and the powerlessness experienced by women within the patriarchal society depicted. The suffering is linked closely to the female body, and the control exercised over it by male society. The female protagonists of the novel try to make their own changes to society, and even though Zaitoon does escape her violent husband, it is still very clear that male control takes over in the end. The novel does not romanticise women's possibilities for freedom within patriarchal society. Its feminism is a feminism of awareness rather than a feminism of radical change. Whereas the novel does not change the society in which it is set – the male characters are virtually unchanged at the end of the story – it does show the reader a reality which must be told.

#### Cracks and a Woman's View of the World

*Cracking India* is a more optimistic novel than *The Pakistani Bride*. While *The Pakistani Bride* has a deep focus on female suffering, *Cracking India* focuses on the cracks in the system – cracks that can be used for self realisation or for the common good. Many of these

cracks exist because *Cracking India* is set in an upper middle class neighbourhood in a large city. The opportunities for freedom are generally higher in a city, where it is easier to move under the radar. Ayah has been discussed above, and with her unveiled lifestyle, she shows many of these cracks. She has escaped her family's control, she has gained the trust of Mother, so that she can move around Lahore freely, and she has found a way in which to use her sexuality to control men. These strategies work for her for many years, but she has not taken into account the way that jealousy can change people and change friendships.

However, Ayah is not the only female character who finds or makes cracks in this novel. Mother and Electric-Aunt carry out the idea of the female world that Carol has in *The Pakistani Bride*: That women should help each other. They help save women who have been kidnapped and raped by the enemy and also perform illegal smuggling of petrol to help Hindus and Sikhs escape the riots and killings during Partition. They are able to do this because they are both without husbands – that is, Father is mostly absent, and Electric-Aunt is a widow. This means they are both in charge of their own time, and, because of their class, they have money and a car at their disposal. While Ayah is on a personal mission to enjoy her life to the fullest, Mother and Electric-Aunt use their cracks of freedom to help others.

Ayah, Mother and Electric-Aunt are able to move freely around the city because they have escaped the male control of purdah. They all use their physical freedom to do things that Zaitoon could only dream of doing. Mother and Electric-Aunt manage to make a difference to the world, and they are still in control of their own physical freedom at the end of the novel. Ayah's body is, as has been discussed above, taken revenge upon by her former friends, and she will probably never be the same life-affirming woman again. Still, the novel ends with Ayah choosing her own future. While Zaitoon was carried away like a foetus or a bunch of twigs on the young soldier's back, Ayah walks on her own two feet into her own future, no matter how difficult it may turn out be.

The female body is focused on in these novels, because it is through the control of the female body that the patriarchal society is able to restrict women's lives and opportunities. Both *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* show the female body as seen from the outside, especially through the novels' representation of the male gaze. Still, they also show the female body as experienced from the inside. Both Zaitoon and Lenny experience the beginning of puberty in the course of the novels. Having little privacy in their daily lives, it is while they're bathing that they have the chance to investigate what is happening to their bodies. Both girls feel joy and pride when they discover that they're developing breasts, and feel happy that they are on their way to attain the female body, which is so oppressed but also

so desired. It is almost a challenge to patriarchy in itself, this joy of being female in a society where the female is seen as lesser and lacking compared to the male.

The moments in which Zaitoon and Lenny slowly become aware of their changing bodies are described as precious and private. So are their moments of sexual longing and fantasy. These are personal experiences that cannot be taken away from them, no matter how hard society tries to objectify their bodies. Zaitoon's body is in the end violated, both by her husband's beatings and by the rapes. The purity of her own sexuality becomes tainted and she may never feel comfortable with her body again. Ayah's pride in her own beauty and femininity may similarly be ruined forever.

Lenny, on the other hand, escapes violation several times. After each of Cousin's attacks on her body, she manages to minimise the impact on her own self worth. While others may have experienced Cousin's violent attempt at intercourse as traumatising, Lenny, although feeling bad at the time, seems to resolve the feeling and move on. After Cousin's trying to coax her into giving him oral sex and then masturbating in front of her, she does not develop unease about penises, but rather becomes curious about how penises work. Lenny, being the youngest of the women depicted in the two novels, represents the future. Her steady sense of self worth in the face of both sexual and systemic oppression gives hope for women of the future.

Lenny does not only represent hope in that she is able to maintain her sense of self despite discrimination and sexual assault. Lenny also gives the only intellectual hope for female liberation and feminism in her society in the future.

So far, the feminism in these two novels has been showing the oppression of the female body in multiple ways. Intellectual liberation is not the focus of these novels, although it has been an essential point for feminism in general. Early in the novel, Lenny comments that her fate was sealed when her parents and the doctor decided not to send her to school. Her intellectual opportunities were thus limited, and she goes about gaining knowledge of the world through observing what the grown-ups do. The act of looking gives Lenny a lot of knowledge of the world, perhaps more than her brother gets in school.

The most important passage of *Cracking India* is the passage in which Lenny meets Gandhi. It has been quoted before, but it is worth quoting again.

He touches my face, and in a burst of shyness I lower my eyes. This is the first time I have lowered my eyes before man.

It wasn't until some years later – when I realized the full scope and dimension of the massacres – that I comprehended the concealed nature of the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi's non-violent exterior.

And then, when I raised my head again, the men lowered their eyes. (96)

Here, Gandhi represents patriarchal power and politics, being one of the politicians negotiating the deal that led to the partition of Punjab. Lenny's symbolic lowering of her eyes in front of Gandhi's male gaze shows her accepting patriarchy and male power, and placing her trust in men as the leaders of society. Later, after gaining knowledge, she raises her head again and sees the world for herself, on her own terms. Her knowledge has given her intellectual power. Now she knows that men are not better leaders than women and that she cannot automatically trust all men to be moral leaders. She does not lower her eyes before men anymore, but looks straight at them and the world. When the men see the knowledge in her eyes, they in turn lower their own. This victory of the female eyes over the male gaze is crucial to the novel's feminism. The Lenny of the future has moved beyond the cataloguing of physical oppression, and into the realm of intellectual freedom. She shows that the way for women to get power and to really challenge the male gaze and patriarchy is through knowledge and intellectual liberation.

The feminism of *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* is a feminism which aims to break the silence regarding the oppression of women in Pakistan. Since the novels set out to inform and shock the reader into action, the feminism has a focus on the description of the different ways on which female bodies are oppressed in the patriarchal society of the novels. Because the female body is something that is supposed to be hidden and not talked about, showing abuse and injustice through the female body makes the message doubly powerful. The novels' focus on injustice and violence aim to enrage the reader into taking action. The eyes of women looking at the world are introduced as an inspiration to women of patriarchal societies to question traditions, to gain their own knowledge of the world and to assert their intellectual power.

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