

## **Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*: an Ecocritical Study of the Interrelationship between a Hostile Environment and Human Perversity**

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### **Abstract**

Ecocriticism is popularly thought of as a unidirectional exercise for preservation of nature in its pristine and uncontaminated form. This view is grossly reductive because ecosystems are many, not one, local not global. The natural green world is not always necessarily friendly to human aspirations. In fact, “green” is the colour of falsehood, unreliability and deception in medieval English literature. The colonial medical discourses also endorse this diversity of the natural world. In these discourses the tropical world of the European colonies is described as a “diseased world” in contrast to the sanitized temperate world of the west. Since the boundary between the humans and the environment is porous, human nature is perverted in environments that are hostile to human habitation. Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* documents the interrelationship between the arid, bleak and closed world of mountains in Kohistan and the perversity of the isolated pockets of feuding tribes that inhabited it. It foregrounds the fact that it is impossible to improve human nature if we simply surrender to uncontrollable natural forces and abandon all efforts to ameliorate our living conditions. It is, therefore, important to realize that ecocriticism is not simply concerned with the protection of a pristine external nature. It is an effort to reframe our interactions with nature not as a matter for mastery but as a matter for negotiation. If human-made changes have endangered the life-supporting systems of the world, we should rather, as Rachel Carson urges, “look about and see” what alternatives are available to us.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, ecosystems, porous boundary, world of green, tropical world, perversity, hostile environment.

Cheryl Glotfelty begins her “Preface” to *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* with a mention of *The Population Bomb* (1968) in which Paul Erlich warned that there would soon be widespread famine and large-scale resource shortage due to the rapid growth of human population and the excessive consumption of resources by the affluent minority. In the present age of Anthropocene in which the life support system of the earth is in danger because of man-made changes it is impossible to dismiss this warning as the cynical raving of an “environmental

doomsayer” (ix). Such warnings have become realistic statements because of the increasing amount of ecological information which the technological innovations of modern science have made demonstrable facts. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (2000) opens with the fearful picture of a spring in which no birds sing because we have striven to create “a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving image of a bird in flight” (127). The apocalyptic warnings about the gloomy prospects of life on earth have created an alarmist situation where nature in the sense of landscapes, rivers and oceans, animal and plant life has been eulogized as a system that nurtures while civilizational progress is dismissed as polluting activities that are detrimental to the survival of life on earth. As a result, there is an idealization of nature as a source of lost simplicity and authenticity. The adoration of authentic, uncontaminated landscapes has created a fetish for wilderness experience, sometimes with disastrous consequences because it has effectively elided the fact that human civilization is the result of “Millenia of indigenous place-making” (Rigby 73). The promotions of the values of nature in nature writings have frozen nature as a static, unchanging entity. This is a grossly reductive configuration which does gross injustice to the world’s “multifarious otherness” (Kenner 114). It is my contention in this essay that Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Pakistani Bride* exposes the unreality of the romantic idealization of nature and encourages us to explore “the multiple contested versions of nature and environmentalism” (Raine 100) instead, by foregrounding how an inhospitable environment breeds human perversity.

The Romantics think that the divorce of human life from nature is the cause of all modern evils. So, they posit reconnection with nature by “erasure of will and consciousness itself” (Watson 41). This ideal of oneness with nature forestalls interference with nature because, as Alexander Pope puts it, “Whatever Is, is RIGHT” (*An Essay on Man*, 294, original emphasis). Jonathan Bate echoed Pope when he admired Romantic poetry as poetry that “let(s) things be”, therefore, fit to effect the “imaginative reunification” of humankind with nature (qtd Seldon et al at 266). This “let(ing) things be” has dangerous implications because it suggests that nature’s authenticity is predicated upon our complete absence from it. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau, the American promoter of communion with nature after shedding the superfluous trappings of civilization, are both cult figures in this environmentalist project of reunification with nature. Both Wordsworthian nature worship and Thoreauvian attitude of fellowship with nature have been oblivious of the multiplicity of natural forms and connections between nature and human beings. In the opinion of Greg Garrard, Wordsworth’s worship of the sublime landscape is done at the expense of “the fens, bogs and marshes” (qtd Seldon et al 266). *Walden*’s promotion of a life lived by paying attention to the essential facts alone, had dangerous consequences for Christopher John McCandless. Disgusted with the complex artificiality of modern society McCandless went to Alaska absolutely unaided so that he could live in the midst of an uncontaminated nature. He died of starvation in about a hundred days since the beginning of his journey. So, in spite of the evidence of Wordsworth and Thoreau, the natural green world is not invariably friendly to human aspirations. It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that green is also the colour of “falsehood, unreliability and

deception” in medieval English literature (Rudd 30). Colonial historical and medical discourses also endorse this unreliability of the natural world by depicting the tropical world of India and other European colonies as a diseased world. David Arnold talks of the “tropical world as a primitive and dangerous environment in contradistinction to an increasingly safe and sanitized temperate world” (7).

The world of green is not uniformly simple and purgative. It is multifaceted and complicated. The popular version of ecology that equates nature with purity, simplicity and authenticity is the result of defective conclusions drawn from scientific findings because “ecosystems are many, not one. . . They vary from place to place and from time to time” (Phillips 580). Overemphasis on nature’s purity and simplicity may breed intolerance for nature’s diversity. Bruno Latour expresses this apprehension when he says: “under the pretext of protecting nature, the ecology movements have also retained the conceptions of nature that makes their political struggle hopeless” (19). The ecology movement is a political struggle against “the dismissal of the value of certain lives” (Lousley 157). So, any conception of nature that only includes its sublime and pristine forms is self-defeating.

Lawrence Buell has observed that “embeddedness inspection-physical context is even more intractably constitutive of personal and social identity...than ideology is” (24). If the “spatio-physical context” is hostile to human life, how does it “constitute” human behaviour? Robert N. Watson’s analysis of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s discussion of tropical landscapes in their own distinctive ways provide the answer to the question. In Watson’s analysis, the translation of Bottom into an ass by Puck’s mischief and the metamorphosis of the lovers who suddenly started fighting and abusing each other like wild beasts under the influence of Oberon’s flower-juice, are indicative of the collapse of the barriers between humanity and ambient nature (46). Mukherjee in his discussion of “tropicality” as a trope in colonial medical discourses observes that the tropical imperial subjects were invariably cast as “malformed, underdeveloped and incapable of moral, material and intellectual progress” because of a “permanently diseased environment”. India was constructed as a country “disposed to material and moral entropy” because of its tropical environment. The trope of tropicality and its attribution of human deformity to the unhealthiness of the tropical environment may be repudiated by postcolonial scholars as deliberate colonial prevarications, but Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* bears testimony to the centrality of the merger of the environment and the subject to ecocriticism.

The concept of a putative pure nature is incompatible with the ecological need for the blended might of human and other than human forces for sustenance of life on earth (Rigby 73). James Ronald Martin admits the possibility of improving ecosystems through sanitary reforms. Comparing, “the pure and bracing air” of England to the primitive environment of the tropical world, he says “let us not forget the important fact that it is man himself who has in great measure created these salubrious climates” (4). Human intervention has certainly

improved the earth's habitability for humans. Though there are numerous literary reminders, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) being the most famous one, that human endeavours to change the living condition may have unanticipated results, yet they do not endorse abandonment of all human efforts to improve our living conditions in "resigned acceptance of our subjection to uncontrollable natural forces" (Rigby 68). Eco-criticism is not primarily concerned with "safeguarding or protecting some pristine, untouchable external nature" (Lousley 158). It recognizes the fact that the border between humans and the environment is porous. It does not posit the existence of true nature in isolation from human beings; rather it encourages adoption of ameliorative measures to improve environmental conditions without endangering the life-support systems of the earth.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* documents the interrelationship between an inhospitable environment and human perversity. It narrates how Zaitoon, who loses her parents during the partition violence when she was only five, is adopted by Qasim, a Kohistani tribesman who moves to the plains after losing his wife and children to small pox, how he marries Zaitoon off to a Kohistani tribesman, Sakhi, when she comes of age, and how she runs away from the perverse life of the tribals and braves the wildness of the mountainous region and escapes to safety. The perversity of the tribesmen in the novel is an extension of the perversity of the environment which is resistant to change and, like Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath, is a brooding presence inimical to human existence.

The interrelationship between the environment and human life is clearly stated when Zaitoon is ten years old and Miriam advises Qasim to drop her out of school because: "she is in the hot plains of Punjab; everything ripens early here" (53). Zaitoon supports this interrelationship when just before her marriage she feels that the "savagery" of the Kohistani tribals is entirely due to the "poverty and the hardships of their fights for survival" (156). The porous boundary between the humans and the environment is emphasized in the sameness of their felonious features. During her flight from Sakhi, Zaitoon felt that Kohistan was a "maelstrom of mountains" that "closed in on her like a pack of wolves" (197). This menacing aspect of the landscape has its parallel in the physical features of the Kohistani tribals. Qasim, for example, has narrow eyes which "combine wariness with the determination of a bird of prey" (20). Hamida's finger's that ran over Zaitoon's head in affectionate welcome were "claw-like" and "talon-like" (155). Even Zaitoon's own voice was affected by the environment. When she told Qasim about her fears in that strange land among strange people, "her voice sounded forlorn, as desolate as the arid brooding mountains to which she had come" (140).

The "isolated pockets of feuding tribes" that inhabited Kohistan had been "imprisoned" within the Karakoram range for centuries. This "isolation" and sense of "imprisonment" had bred in them a perverse "notions of honour and revenge; a handful of maize stolen, a man's pride slighted, and the price is paid in bloody family feuds" (115). Major Mushtaq's story of the Khan who received six thousand rupees from the government for the takeover of the land,

corroborates this perverse sense of revenge. Six thousand rupees was a lot of money for those indigent tribals which could have considerably bettered their miserable condition. But the Khan went out to kill all the male members of a rival clan and paid the six thousand rupees as fine for the crime. He did not grudge the fine the Wali of the Swat valley imposed on him. He was happy that the ten murders had quelled the fire of revenge burning within him, had taken “a load off his mind” so that his “conscience was now at ease.” Only a perverse code would sanction such brutal, mindless acts of revenge in the name “conscience”.

The same perversity of the tribal code of honour is fore grounded early in the novel in Qasim’s murder of Giridharilal. After the death of his wife and children, Qasim came to Jullunder and worked as a security guard in a bank. On occasions when he used the Indian style lavatory of the bank, he left it clogged with stones and smooth surfaced glass that caused much consternation among the employees who used it later. Giridharilal, who was in charge of the cleanliness of the bank building, once followed Qasim to confirm the suspicion that he was behind the mischief. He accosted Qasim and asked him directly if he had thrown the stones in the lavatory. Qasim had no sense of having done anything wrong. But when Giridharilal called him the “filthy son of a Muslim mountain hag” Qasim lifted him and pressing him against the wall tried to throttle him. Giridharilal was saved when the other employees intervened and pushed them apart. But one month after, taking advantage of the Partition violence, Qasim stealthily made his way to Giridharilal’s quarters one night and shot him dead. Qasim had no remorse, rather he felt vindicated as “Death was the price for daring such an insult to his tribe, his blood, his religion” (23). In the perverse world of a tribal’s honour and revenge human life has no value: “A man killed was a candle snuffed out, a tree felled, no more” (109).

This exaggerated sense of honour and the determination to kill for any imaginary insult to this honour also accounts for the frenetic search for Zaitoon when she ran away from her “tyrannical animal trainer” of a husband (174). A run-away wife brings disgrace to the entire clan: “The threatening disgrace hung like an acrid smell around them. It would poison their existence unless they found the girl” (190). The infallible law of the tribal’s land mandated that Zaitoon must be killed to salvage the honour lost. So, all the men took up their guns and hunted collectively for Zaitoon. Even Hamida, who had been “whole-heartedly subservient to the ruthless code of her forefathers” was aghast at the perversity of all these killings for an undefined honour and now “loathed it with all her heart” (191).

The men are governed by a perverse sense of masculinity which warrants them to keep their words at all costs. So, when Zaitoon fears to spend her life among the strange tribals in the strange terrain of Kohistan and requests her father to take her back and marry her off, if at all, to a man from the plains, Qasim silences her saying: “I have given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands” (158). A little later he was filled with remorse for his unexpected fury but he was as defenseless against the perverse code of masculinity as the girl who succumbed to it.

The code of masculinity reinforced by the racial tradition of the Kohistani tribals endorsed the cruel battering of women to enforce their submission to men. Women are always at the receiving end of this naturalized perversion. Within a few months of marriage, the drudgery of their lives, disease and routine beatings from their men deform and transform them beyond recognition. Hamida, for example, who was known for her “vivacious beauty” (173) in youth, had become bent with “arthritis and hard labour”. “Deep scars on her cheeks distended her toothless mouth in a curious grin. Old at forty, she had suffered a malicious disease that had shrunk strips of her skin and stamped her face with a perennial grimace” (155-156).

Sakhi embodied the most despicable form of human perversity. The most repulsive instance of his perversity appears soon after his marriage. An “insane, ungovernable fury” gripped him when his brother Yunus Khan’s taunt meant that he was not “man” enough to control his wife. He spent his wrath on his ox when it was unable to remove a half-submerged rock. The poor creature skidded on its stomach and refused to budge. Sakhi shouted and beat the ox with a “heavy stick that fell pitilessly on a sore on its spine”. He derived a perverse pleasure from it: “a venomous satisfaction shuddered through him. He hit the ox again and again until the flesh gaped open” (171). When Hamida heard the beast roaring she ran to the site and flung herself between Sakhi and the ox. Sakhi grew furious and landed the stick on her bent shoulder. Sakhi’s murderous cruelty and subhuman wrath is loath fully for grounded in Sidhwa’s description of the scene: Hamida “scrambled like a crab down the sloping terrain. Sakhi skidded after her wielding his staff. She tried to run, but a blow hit her legs and she fell forward.” Appalled at this site, Zaitoon intervened and managed to hold the stick. But Sakhi’s anger would brook no interference and he hit Zaitoon “on her thigh, on her head, yelling, ‘You are my woman! I’ll teach you to obey me’” (172-73). A little later he almost killed her when he saw her waving innocently at the soldiers in spite of his warnings against it. This false sense of manliness and readiness to kill for any supposed insult to it is a blatant subversion of basic humanity.

Sidhwa makes it amply clear that the perversity of Sakhi and the tribals is largely due to the closed, intractable wildness that surrounds them. The only purpose of life in those “uncompromising mountains” was “survival”, nothing more (12). It is as if nature in Kohistan militates against human habitation. Zaitoon’s first impression of Kohistan as a “closed world of mountains” and “an intractable wildness, unpeopled and sightless” (154) is a confirmation of this exclusion of humans from the Kohistani eco-system. So, Zaitoon could not make out a single living form when “she studied the flat mud and stone huts sprinkled about the foot of the hills” (155).

The absolute hostility of the environment towards human beings in distress dawned on Zaitoon when she was chased by the entire clan of tribals for daring to run away from Sakhi. The landscape was sterile: “Not a trace of life. Not even the droppings of a mountain goat” (192). At night the sky appeared to be “rent by sharp mountain peaks” and huge “icy stars pierced her face with darts of cold”. At noon the next day Zaitoon climbs down into a “dark,

subterranean world of cold shadows” and there was no trace of any habitation only “icy winds whistling around her” (192-95). She came upon a huge vulture with an eight-foot wing-span resting on the frozen cliff. “It staggered towards her demonically like a monster” (208). Zaitoon escaped from the vulture to meet a crouching snow leopard that sprang on a hunter killing him before being killed by a fellow hunter. Zaitoon felt as if the environment conspired with the tribals to kill her. All around her there were: “Hills and more hills. Arid and bleak” (208).

Qasim’s nostalgic reminiscences filled Zaitoon’s young heart with images of the cool mountains as a romantic landscape: men were “heroic, proud and incorruptible”; they were “gods- free to roam their mountains as their fancies led;” women were “beautiful as houris” and children “bright and rosy cheeked” and all around them there were “crystal torrents of melted snow” (90). But during her escape from Kohistan when the “mountains closed in on her like a pack of wolves”, she realized with horror that there was nothing magical and splendid about these hills. The unmitigated menace of the region brought home the horrible truth that “the land she stood on *was her enemy: a hostile inscrutable maze*” (197, italics mine). The evening wind in the army camp rattled the windows as if “fierce demons had been let loose” (127). The “leviathan waters” of the Indus looked like “a seething, sapphire snake” (145). The gorge at Dubair was a “seething turquoise snake, voluminous and deep.”

Sidhwa’s text is thus filled with images that buttress a feeling that there is very little in this landscape that is life-supporting. The “spatio-physical context” that is “constitutive of personal and social identity” (Buell 24), in this case is that of a closed world of mountains resistant to progress symbolized in the Karakorum Highway. The progress of the highway was “measured in yards, not miles” because of the obstacles put up by “avalanches, landslides, sudden crazy winds” (127). The tribals who inhabited these lands only exhibited the same rough and unfriendly ways in their dealings with others. So, “No subtle concession to reason or consequence tempered his [Qasim’s] fierce capacity to love or hate” (30). Sakhi was “buried in a way of life that could afford no sentiment” (169).

Sidhwa’s novel interrogates the popular view of ecocriticism as a unidirectional exercise for preservation of nature in its pristine and uncontaminated form. The interrelationship between an adverse environment and human perversity is so explicit in this novel that all efforts to ameliorate environmental conditions appear as laudable not criminal endeavours. Todd A. Borlik suggested as much when he probed the Renaissance attitude to nature: “Nature does not exist for its own opaque, independent purposes; its *raison d’être* was to nourish and enrich human life. In those inhospitable, infertile places where it failed to perform its function adequately, human intervention was necessary to improve its manifest defects” (1). Contemporary environmentalism that prohibits human intervention is described by Watson as dangerous and flawed. He points out that Shakespeare had already anticipated this flawed environmentalism in the character of Jacques. Jacques’s sentimental outburst against Duke Senior’s deer-hunting is, in fact, another anthropocentric imposition on nature (42). The conception of nature as something pure which exists in isolation from human beings is also responsible for, what Cheryl Louseley calls, the present “farcical cultural moment” when the readily available environmental knowledge has not prevented human beings from activities that

are hazardous for the human society at large (156). It is wrong to assume that ecocriticism is primarily concerned with preservation of the environment in its pristine purity. Instead of safeguarding a sublime nature, environmentalists should fight against “inequalities of the distribution of ecological hazards and pleasures” (Lousley 157). As Rachel Carson puts it: “If . . . we have at last asserted our ‘right to know’ and if, knowing, we have concluded that we are being asked to take senseless and frightening risks . . . we should look about and see what other course is open to us” (240). Sidhwa’s text has also urged us to “look about and see” what inhospitable environmental conditions make of man. Instead of abandoning all efforts to reshape our environment, we should, therefore, reframe our interactions with nature as a “matter of negotiation rather than mastery” (Rigby 68).

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