

You Better Not Never Tell Nobody but God: A Study of Sidhwa's Fiction from Feminist Perspective

* Dr. Shamshad Rasool, Lecturer (Corresponding Author)

** Dr. Waseem Hasan Malik, Assistant Professor

*** Dr. Raza-e-Mustafa, Assistant Professor

Abstract

The feminists have particularly pointed out the issue of silencing women. The epigraphs in Walker (30, 2004) 'you better not never tell nobody but God' and Sidhwa (1989) reflect the silencing of women as it has been the norm that women's experiences are individual, not political. Sidhwa following Beauvoir (1983) that personal is political, covertly or overtly, uncovers the atrocities being inflicted on women of the subcontinent by patriarchy to engender them voiceless through various assumptions and ideologies. To this end, three novels, Water, The Bride, and Ice-Candy-Man have been analyzed to develop an idea of the tools which are employed to force women not to disclose personal experiences. For analysis of the texts, the ideas of different postcolonial feminists have been applied. The study shows that women remain silent in social and domestic matters. They docilely bear quandary and molestation as 'icons of honor' in idyllic as well as sadistic circumstances. They do not share their defilement as they are conditioned that silence is the only asylum for them. Sidhwa as a harbinger of the voice of women of the subcontinent has demystified the essentials of patriarchy as a firsthand witness of their silencing and subjugation.

Keywords: Domestic Matters, Icon of Honour, Ideologies, Patriarchy, Silencing, Subjugation.

Introduction

Conflicts among different strata of life are perennial which work on a corporeal, intellectual or philosophical level (Rasool, 2009). The ascendancy and injustice of one group or class over another are at the root as the powerful publicizes the powerless as worthless and sees "one set of human beings . . . as the norm and evaluates others as existing only for self" (Ifechelobi, 2014, p. 17). Such a mindset fortifies sexism, racism, and classism. The struggle to gain equality and control instigates a movement that may turn into a struggle over the language being used to speak what is prohibited.

Feminism is one of the movements launched by the oppressed for their self-assertion in history (Walker, 1990; Rasool, 2009). It is a political movement, a philosophy in the field of morality, and a theory in social life aimed at the egalitarian rights of females as human beings. As a political act, it aims not simply to interpret the world but to bring a change in the world (Fetterly, 1978). It challenges the notions of androcentric ideology entrenched in language, social life, literature, media, politics, and culture as well as the notions of 'Female Self' (Culler, 2005; Green, & LeBihan, 1996; Ruthven, 1984). Currently, the discussion has emerged about various Feminism rather than Feminism (Culler, 2005) because the feminists are struggling for the end of sexism in social, political, and cultural contexts. They have examined the ways the patriarchal system makes the women silent or voiceless, and lose their identities.

Silencing has been an effective tool of establishing a societal and interpersonal hierarchy between the oppressed and the oppressor (Rasool, 2009). Patriarchy has effectively used silence for exercising its power over women. The silence on the part of the oppressed is detrimental to gain their identity. Durrani (1995) asserts that it overlooks injustice, grows subservience, and nurtures malevolent hypocrisy. Due to silence, the oppressor thrives. She decided to write *My Feudal Lord* (1995) 'to break the traditional silence' (p. 4). The experiences faced by women have deprived them

* Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat Email: shamshad.rasool@uog.edu.pk

** Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro
Email: waseem.hasan@uos.edu.pk

***Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat Email: raza.mustafa@uog.edu.pk

of their identity and dignity. Some equilibrium in human rights can set in when they begin voicing their sentiments and their 'self'.

The present study has been undertaken to highlight the issue of silencing of women using feminist ideas, themes, and cultural background concerning the portrayal of females in Sidhwa's fiction. To this end, the research question is 'What are the tacit patriarchal assumptions, essentialities, and prevailing social ideals which force women of the subcontinent to remain silent against their quandary?'

Literature Review

Voicing the dilemma of the voiceless has been a major concern of the writers. It is an important theme in the feminist writings which try to break the silence prevailing on the side of the marginalized women and put a challenge that women have been a silent portion of humanity since the inception of the civilized patriarchal societal structures and language. They portray another side of the profile and pinpoint the conditions which have subdued women's voice. They have analyzed the devices, attitudes, discourse, and language which have contributed to their voiceless position. They deconstruct the social structures which disallow women to become human beings in the real sense.

The feminists have aroused a sense of self-consciousness, provided them an impetus to give expression to their experiences to break the prevailing silence to ensure them a secure future. They preached that the oppressor remains innocent until the oppressed tells its story. Mostly, they tell the stories of women to rectify the rampant situation through arousing awareness in them '.... with the anticipation of a reconciled future in which one hopes that justice and harmonious relations might be secured' (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000, p. 4).

Women were kept away from education and hence writing so that they may not be able to express their experiences and tell their tales because men knew that the words are never neutral. They have great potential. Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin (2003) say that 'the book and the pen are the keys to power. . .'. Men kept the means of communication in their control. Till the 19th century, women faced severe encounters in getting education, writing, and then getting their works published (33, 1998), for example, Mary Ann Evans, the author of *The Mill on the Floss*, got her works published through her pen-name, George Eliot. The pen and book encroached by patriarchy have become interchangeable symbols of deep effects on the position of women. Such silence on the part of women has served as a pedagogical purpose in shaping the attitude of society towards them (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2003).

Being incapable of appropriating the existing language, women are voiceless. As the established discourse is patriarchal, it hampers women from expressing their experiences (Smith, 1990; Woolf, 1998). They have never been well-versed in this mode of expression. Millet (1977) opines that to be able to speak about something, one must be able to name and define it. That is why feminist writers and theorists recommend redefining words capable of reflecting and recording women's experiences (Luke, 1994).

The writings by women about their experiences have been considered shameful acts (Walters, 2007; Rasool, 2009). Shame and silence often work simultaneously. Sometimes silence has disgraced women's heads and sometimes shame has caused voicelessness. Durrani (1995) writes that in society a woman cannot "reveal her intimate secrets" (p. 375). In such a scenario, to be silent is a heinous crime. It impedes "women's social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned" (Uwakweh, 1995, p. 75). It is pitiful that women are contented with their status. Up till the mid-19th century, women have been as they were labeled by men.

Currently, feminist writers are challenging the silence to bring them to a reasonable position in the milieu. They are representing the predicament of the wretched women. They are attempting to give voice to the voiceless women; the concept of voice as a means of empowerment has been a key element in feminist theory and practice since the beginning of the women's movement (Luke, 1994). Though this trend begins in Western countries, the female writers from postcolonial areas could not help being influenced by this wave. The writers from the subcontinent like Desai (India), Sidhwa (Pakistan), Suleri (Pakistan), Roy (India), Nasrin (Bangladesh), and many others are giving voice to the experiences of women. It is unnatural for a courageous person to remain silent against the injustice and oppression of fellow human beings. Sidhwa (1989) announces that she is not a senseless being; she is a human being.

Before a rigorous analysis of the texts of Sidhwa, it seems expedient to describe a little about shame as silence and shame often work simultaneously; sometimes silence brings shame, and sometimes shame brings silence. Cooley (1992) states that shame makes a person repentant. She/he faces a deed that is condemnable according to social ideals. She/he thinks of herself/himself from the others' point of view. So the sight of the others is imposed on the self and a person acts accordingly (Elia, 1982).

Most of the deeds causing shame are related to the context or place of living. It cannot be verbalized or recognized in routine life (Sueda, 2000). It, sometimes, arises internally, and sometimes, imposed externally. The people of the community determine it. According to Cooley (1992), human consciousness is a social process that is shaped in the context without realizing it where one spends much of one's life. Self-monitoring from the viewpoint of others arouses sentiments concerning the self. Schef (1994) observes that in a social process a person always remains in either a state of shame or pride; shame works on the unconscious/instinct level. He further states that a person always imagines about herself/himself and in this process of imagining she/he shares the judgment of the others' minds. He clarifies that mere systematic reflection of oneself does not lead one to pride or shame but one is led by the accredited sentiments and their effect on the others' thinking. Cooley (1992) describes three steps of self-monitoring: the imagination of one's appearance before others, imagining the value of such appearance, and, resultantly, feelings of pride or shame. Shaming is constructed socially. It denounces or disapproves the self in the light of social intentions or the effects of raising the feelings of remorse in a person who is ashamed or condemned by others who are aware of the act of shaming (Braithwaite, 1989). Therefore, it brings silence, and silence brings marginalization.

Research Methodology

The present research involves the writer's perspective that she has conveyed through her fiction which operates through the ideas. The weight of the argument depends on its validity and strength, and the data that supports it. In the area of interpretive sociologies, the methodologies which cause the production of texts can be turned back on the texts themselves (Walker, 2005). The shreds of evidence from the selected fiction have been analyzed to construct the approach of a writer.

Being a qualitative study, the data would consist of words, sentences, ideas, and themes. So it requires intensive reading to identify the pieces of evidence as the texts contain ideas and themes given by the writer. Therefore, no other method is suitable for the present study than 'Textual Analysis'.

Discussion and Findings

The silence about the singling out and defilement of women prevailed in history as well as in literature before the inception of Feminism. The feminists have struggled to break the silence. Among them, a female writer of Pakistani origin, Sidhwa, has tried to give voice to what has not been told of. She has made the reader feel for the women victimized during the partition. Ayah's pain runs through the veins of the readers and reaches the bones of the sensitive readers.

Silence about the Representation of the Experiences of Women

Sidhwa is of the view that women remain voiceless in tumultuous as well as idyllic circumstances. In the narratives about partition, she portrays that silence and shame reside as a fate of women even after the trauma of partition was over. Their molestation remains unaddressed. Even history fails in capturing what they have suffered. Sidhwa (2000) concedes that little has been said about the violation of women during the partition. Women had no words to articulate what happened to them because they could not appropriate patriarchal language to express the mishaps. Unveiling anything would lose the remnant honor and identity. The shame inflicted on them by the discourse of the patriarchal society kept them mute. This attitude exacerbated the situation.

It is noteworthy that, in *Ice-Candy-Man*, Hamida's encounter and Ayah's quandary are brought to the surface through Godmother and the cousin of Lenny. Ayah requests Godmother to liberate her from her so-called husband. The Godmother asks if Ice-candy-man mistreats her. She replies in two sentences, "Not now.... But I cannot forget what happened" (1989, p.262). Like other wretched victims, she is unable to narrate what has happened to her. The narrator of Sidhwa, Lenny, tells about Ayah that Ice-candy Man forced Ayah to become a dancing girl. The cataclysm of Ayah is mere hearsay, tri-remote from reality. Godmother guesses from Ice-candy-man's remarks 'he has christened our Ayah Mumtaz' (p. 260).

The few sentences spoken by Ayah to persuade Godmother for her emancipation are: 'I want to go to my family' (p.261). And then she says that she is unable to live with him: "I'm past that, I'm not alive" (p.261). The heart-wrenching version of Ayah steers the readers' minds to conclude what has happened to her while they ponder over it keeping in view the lustful nature of men. These are few sentences to capture her singling out, disgrace and dehumanization. It reflects that literature and history are silent in representing the abducted women's encounters during the partition of the subcontinent.

Butalia (2006, p. 200) interviewed the women who were abducted during the partition. She avers that they lacked words and the interviewee would say, 'I have no words and they tried to cry'. She observes that the words would fall short suddenly: 'Memory encountered something painful'. The interviewee would say, 'how can I describe this? There are no words to do so'. Butalia says that shame would lock their faculty of articulation and in this way, the telling remained incomplete as she was unable to force them to speak in such a situation. It is literal silence when a person is unable to appropriate the language (Rasool, 2009). One is unable to bring to the surface the real accounts of the catastrophe. One is left to mere supposition and speculations.

Silence due to Shame

From the foregoing description, it can be inferred that it is pitiful that do not disclose the true nature of patriarchal misogyny. Ayah says that she is passed, requires emancipation from Ice-candy-man but does not instigate Godmother against him. Hamida, outcast by her family, submits to the decision without objecting. The implication is that they are silent due to the shame inflicted by society. Shame locks their jaws.

Silence exacerbates Hamida's predicament. She hides her debasement and demoralization as a 'Fallen woman'. She remains mum at Lenny's queries. Instead, ". . . tears soak right through my flannel nightgown" (1989, p. 215). Hamida forbids her to ask such questions. She avoids talking on this issue lest Lenny's mother should fire her. Her sullyng is reported by the all-knowing Godmother that after being kidnapped, she carried to Amritsar and that when a woman is touched by a stranger or a man from the opposite religious group, the husband or the members of her family believe that she has been polluted: "Once that happens, sometimes, the husband- or his family- won't take her back" (p. 215). Consequently, she has brought dishonor on them. Therefore, they do not allow such a woman to rejoin them because she is considered polluted by lustful men. The patriarchal assumptions seal Hamida's fate. She is prohibited to see her children lest they should be polluted by her vicious fate.

There are numerous shreds of evidence in Sidhwa's fiction where women prefer silence due to shame. Silence due to shame on the part of Kalyani, in *Water*, brings misfortune for her. When Narayan eagerly points to his mansion, she asks the name of his father. When he tells, Kalyani, hysterically, requests to turn to the Ghats. Despite Narayan's cajole appeals, she does not disclose the secret but insists on returning. Indeed, she has been a client of Narayan's father. She is unable to reveal anything to Narayan about her frustration. She remains silent. Her silence is disabling. She commits suicide to avoid perpetual ignominy and shame for being unable to face Seth, her father-in-law who has been prostituting her. She had no words to unveil what has been happening to her. Kalyani's suicide reflects that women have a mindset conditioned by the patriarchal assumptions which work on instinct level; for example, Feroza, in *An American Brat* (2006a), is so much obsessed with the Islamization of Pakistan that she forbids her mother to come to school in short clothes.

Kalyani endures what cannot be cured. Her silence brings her death and ill-fate. She foresees the prospective reaction of Narayan's family which is unbearable for her. She returns to her previous vile place. Articulation of her experiences would have avoided her calamity as Narayan seems ready to marry her even after the situation clears. He leaves his house to take her to Calcutta, but when he reaches the Ghats, her funeral ceremony is being performed.

Sidhwa pinpoints the shame imposed on women by the patriarchy. They are branded prostitutes but the clients like Seth Dwarkanath remain innocent, pious, and hence respectful. Unfearfully, they claim using prostitutes their right: "our holy texts say Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed" (2006b, p. 174).

Sidhwa (1989) demystifies patriarchy when Lenny protests against such behavior of the society with women. She says, "why? It isn't her fault she was kidnapped!" Godmother replies that "some folk feels that way — they can't stand their women being touched by other men" (p. 215). She

observes that the women on both sides of the new border would never recover from the atrocities committed against them during and after partition due to shame and silence. They can never express their debasement. They have accepted it as their fate. They can never raise any riot against it because of the prevailing social and patriarchal structures. It would be equal to losing their present status and cause more humiliation. Such silence is enabling. They remain silent to secure their future and to avoid further misfortune.

Godmother consoles Ayah of the humiliation saying, 'that was fate daughter'. She persuades her to forget it as "it can't be undone". So the way of survival was 'forgiveness'. The words used for the consolation reflect the norm that women are to sacrifice, forgive and then forget. No man is questioned. No litigation ensues against the atrocities committed against women. They are only to endure as "worse things are forgiven", Godmother advises Ayah. In life, worries are buried to make room for fresh joys and sorrows. The past fades gradually. So Ayah should reconcile with life.

The fallen women silently admit to the discredit conceding it the decree of their fate. Hamida labels them 'poor fate smitten women' (p. 213). Sidhwa raises the issue through her narrator. Lenny protests against the rejection of Hamida by her husband. She says: 'It isn't her fault she was kidnapped!'. She advises Hamida to meet her children stealthily. But Hamida refuses to do so lest her husband should punish them. Hamida's silence is disabling. It disables her as a useful member of society because she submits to her categorized position.

Silence in Connubial Matters

Sidhwa has pointed out voicelessness encompasses women's entire life; domestic, matrimonial, and social. From girlhood, they are trained to survive through the realization of a successful nuptial life. They are particularly conditioned to remain silent among the in-laws. For example, in *Water*, when Chuyia demands fish, she encounters her mother's justification; she would pile shame for her parents if she rebuts her in-laws in the same way.

Women bear battering and privations to make the marital life successful. In the description of Lenny's mother, it is evident that her husband bruises her body when she tries to check him from going to another woman. Though she is an activist and liberal, she reconciles her battering to avoid cracks in her marital bond.

Sidhwa pinpoints that women have to obey every verdict of the superior (male) docilely. A reconciling and voiceless woman is considered chaste. Raising a voice by a woman may result in her killing or making silent in the light of the normalized social ideals. Sidhwa provides ample reprimand of the conditioning of women. In *The bride* (2006a, p. 329), when Zaitoon was perturbed to see the miserable ways of living of the tribesmen, she dares suggest to her father not to marry her to a tribesman as she is alien to the customs of the Kohistanis. Upon her humble objection, her father "groped for her and his hand closed around her throat". His tone became icily decisive and he asserted, 'you break my words, girl, and you cover my name with dung! Do you understand that? Do you?'. Zaitoon withdraws her claim and lies silent, "Yes, she croaked, she will utterly defeat". This incident explains the condition of women how they are treated and married against their will for the honor of men or family-like dumb creatures or for coveting money and how they are forced to obey the decisions of the male lords.

Women are married in exchange for money or social status. Afshan, the wife of Zaitoon's father Qasim, is married to him when he was yet a minor. Afshan is a full-bloomed woman when she is sold to a man Arbab like a commodity for the bad debt of her father. He offers the gift to his son, Qasim, who is just ten. Afshan is quite stunned to see her so-called husband and, ". . . tears of disappointment rolled down her cheeks". Without a protest, she silently accepts it as her lot and endures everything patiently while Qasim grows into a man.

In *Water*, the father of Chuyia, Somnath, decides the marriage of six years old girl due to the social status and affluence of Hira Lal who is 44 years old. His wife, Bhagya's objection is overruled for uttering blasphemy against her husband. He cites the holy book to make his wife speechless: "woman's role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons: That is all!" (2006b, p. 8-9). Bhagya becomes silent, disabling silent. As a religious duty, she partakes in engendering the quandary of Chuyia. She starts inculcating the fanciful dreams of matrimonial life. Though Chuyia never goes to Lal's house, she is declared a widow after his death.

Traditionally, in the Hindu religion, the widow has three options: she will either burn herself on the pyre of her husband or she will marry the brother of the deceased if the elders of the family

allow it (Ebert, 2006; Berardenelli, 2006) or she would remain in the ashram for the rest of her life and lead a life of seclusion and austerity for the 'salvation of the soul of her deceased husband' (Sidhwa, 2006b, p. 150). Chuyia is forced to live in an ashram on the bank of the river Ganges. There is no objection or protest against the unjust cruel treatment. Only her mother laments at her daughter's impending calamity but she is helpless before the religious commandments. The other widows in *Water* also remain silent and accept the patriarchal normalized tradition and canons as a religious duty.

Sidhwa portrays the silence of women in marital matters which is due to either shame or submission to patriarchal notions. They are conditioned to be shy/silent in matters concerning their marriages and matches (Rasool, 2009). Sidhwa seems to instigate women to challenge the patriarchal assumptions practically instead of mere arguments as Miriam or Bhagya did because silence in the matrimonial affairs leads to quandary as it happens in the cases of Zaitoon, or Chuyia, Shakuntla, Bua, and other widows in the ashram.

In *The Bride*, Miriam opposes Qasim's decision about Zaitoon's marriage with Sakhi but verbally. She pleads that the hillmen are barbarous and Zaitoon is unfamiliar with their ways and civilization. But Qasim insists that he has given his words. His words are more valuable than the life of an orphan girl. The honor of his words is that he has sold Zaitoon for 'five hundred rupees- some measly maize and a few goats' (2006a, p. 286). He was selling her like a merchant. Miriam pleads with Zaitoon that she should resist her father's decision but Zaitoon remains silent simply saying that she cannot cross her father.

Silence inflicted upon women prevails on most of the female characters. Madhumati, the administrator of the ashram, is a victim of the callousness of her in-laws after her husband's death. When she demands her share from the inheritance which she may live off, her mother-in-law ordered her two sons to give her due share. They took her to a jungle twenty miles away, rape her for a week and throw her to die of starvation. Hence, she is forced to join the ashram when she is barely fourteen. Then she is fetched to the clients.

Kalyani, born of a poor family is married to the highest bidder at the age of six. Her so-called old husband dies and she is brought to the Ghats as a widow at nine. Later on, Madhumati prostitutes her to earn money to run the ashram. Kalyani obeys silently. The pathetic stories of Bua and Shakuntala also bring the prevalent silence to the surface. Bua becomes a widow at thirty-five. She is forced to join the ashram. Her landowner brothers also refuse to give her a share because her karma had eaten up her husband. Shakuntala too suffers from the same indictment. Her husband's departure brings disdain to her in-laws. At last, she is forced to lead her remaining life in misery imprisoned in the ashram.

Silence due to Religion

Sidhwa highlights the exploitation of women in the name of religion. Men do not follow the teachings of the religion strictly but they delimit women's lives in the name of religious doctrines. Women prefer to be voiceless in the expectation of eternal salvation in heaven. In *Water*, the objection of Bhagya against Somnath's verdict about Chuyia's match is worthless when he relates the duties and roles of females from the scripture. She is unable to defend her stance against the holy book. She surrenders before her husband's will as "many women who find themselves in such situations resign to fate" (Ifechelobi, 2004, p. 25). The widows in the ashram suffer seclusion as a religious duty for the salvation of the soul. As the story unfolds, it is uncovered that the suttee is a tradition or a ritual, not a religious obligation. It has an economic backdrop.

Challenging the Norms

Sidhwa demystifies the ritual of widowhood through Chuyia. She thrills a new spirit among the women in the ashram; Kalyani gets ready for marriage; even Shakuntala questions the ritual of suttee and the social norms. Before this, she advises Chuyia that it is a sin for a widow even to imagine remarriage. She believes that 'widowhood was a punishment for a sinful existence of the past' (2006b, p. 146). Later on, she feels it is right of Kalyani to love and remarry. Therefore, she helps her leave the ashram and go to Narayan.

Shakuntala questions the commandment of the scripture: 'Pandit-Ji, is it written that widows should be treated badly?' (2006b, p. 157). She is disgusted to know that the British government has passed a law in 1938 for abolishing the rite of suttee but the Hindu fundamentalists were not ready to abide by this law and neglected it. She also castigates Madhumati as the widows should have been

informed about the law. Gandhi has also propagated that widows should not be strangers to sex but the patriarchy has ignored the laws as they do not suit their interests.

Conclusion

After analyzing the shreds of evidence, it can be inferred that women are worthless without a husband. They are born for men and after their death, they are insignificant just like a scrap lying in the dung heap, 'a wife is part of her husband while he's alive'... And when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die (p. 42) and the half-dead feel no pain.

The only role of women is to give sons to their husbands. Fertility is a complementary characteristic of women. The position of widows in *Water* reveals that wives are not only accused for their husbands' deaths but also charges with polluting the spirit of their better half simply due to vital potential sexuality. That's why they silently admit to their new role in the ashram instead of raising voice against widowhood. The widows like Madhumati, Kalyani, and Chuyia in *Water* undergo girlhood marriages. They become widows without tasting the fruit of matrimonial bliss. The stories of their sufferings represent the prevailing silence on their part.

Women have to surrender before the arguments of their males when they cite their duties from the holy book as they could not say against the scripture. For example, Somnath does not think of his folly; if his decision was according to the teachings of the religion or not, or marriage of a juvenile is justified or not.

To conclude, Sidhwa propagates that women undergo every patriarchal atrocity silently and do not challenge the societal norms lest they should fall short of the set standards. They obey their men to seek salvation. Such silence of women is disabling, and the biggest hurdle in getting their true identity as human beings. She writes to give them a voice. Like feminists, she instigates them to raise their voices against the imposed discrimination and restrictions otherwise their subservience to patriarchy would be never-ending.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Sidhwa's fiction may be studied to highlight the defilement of women in tumultuous situations, that is, why they are targeted by the hostile groups; how do they suffer as icons of honor of the family or the ethnic or religious group. Keeping in view that literature is a reflection of society, it recommended investigating the status of women in the milieu.

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