

Eco-Feminism and Its Impact on Gender Construction in Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract

The article analyzes the impact of eco-feminism on gender construction through the fictional representation in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* (1990) in the guidelines of the theoretical framework applied - Judith Butler's gender performativity. It is an attempt to trace elements of ecofeminism and gender construction in the novel under study to add a new dimension different from the old and traditional feminist and gender perspectives. Ecofeminism is a newly theoretical perspective that creates a common bond between nature and women, both being the victims of the hegemonic (Adams, 1994) socio-cultural dominant powers. Therefore, the two schools of thought, feminism and ecology, highlight inequalities and discrimination against both the victims on the platform of ecofeminism. Furthermore, similarly subservient segments of society and nature suffer at the hands of the patriarchal and gender biased culture. That is why eco-feminists unfold the identical features of nature and women like nurturing, caring and sacrificial affections that can be found inherent in the two. Thus, the story of gender categorized culture does not end upon the wretchedness of ecological structure, the novel proceeds to mark the force of socio-cultural taboos constituting gender constraints for its weaker segment in power.

Keywords: eco-feminism, gender construction, nature, nurturing, gender stereotyping, fluidity

Background of the Study

Men live in homes, women live in bodies Sara Suleri, *The Meatless Days* (1989). Gender studies has recently been increasingly one of the key areas of research within literatures and linguistics particularly and other associated disciplines generally. Its constructed identification and representation have remained a heated debate to highlight the marginalization and inequality in contemporary world of probe and research. More specifically to say, gender construction has a long history

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to be construed by various schools of thought of gender and feminism from their traditional specific perspectives. Consequently, we are swarmed up with gender stereotyping in our lives out-and-out all around (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). So are its rampant normative notions that are taken-for-granted without any doubt or question of their defectiveness for their applicability to human beings. Its cliché-ridden norms have ever-presence in all aspects of our lives – in conversation, humor, actions, behaviors and preferences since childhood to old-age. Gender is so deeply-rooted concept in our institutions, our ideologies, our beliefs, our customs and our desires that it has started to be taken natural trait of human beings. Further, this established gender stereotypical system causes strengthening gender categorization and demarcation that suits to patriarchy. “Community system puts the relationship of women and men manifested in various forms and patterns of behavior that reflects the acceptance of the women and men in the position of each gender” (Soray, 2015, p.82).

Therefore, the present study problematizes the taken-for-granted gender notions in Bapsi Sidhwa’s (1938) *The Pakistani Bride* (1990) from the perspective of Judith Butler’s gender performativity. The undertaken Butlerian deconstructive approach through the close reading of the two novels is an attempt to help suspend the prevalent stereotypical thoughts that are supported by traditional socio-cultural discourse. So, the present study supported by the research framework of Judith Butler’s gender deconstruction that challenges the stereotypical gender understanding that gender is a natural and binary concept.

There is no correlation of gender and sexuality that is mistakenly thought to be. Gender is a socio-cultural impact like eco-feminism. While sexuality is a biological feature, nothing to do with socio-cultural identities that are man-made and can be challenged and deconstructed because they are not fixed and natural like sexuality. The interpretation of gender in terms of sexuality leads to a defective concept that promotes gender hackneyed standards in a society.

Hence, the present study takes a different stance from the traditional feminist and gender essentialist schools of thought by deconstructing gender stereotypical conception portrayed by the novelist from sexuality - gender is a socio-cultural construct but sexuality is a biological concept in the textual analysis of the two works, *The Pakistani Bride* (1990)

The Author and the Context of Selected Work for the Study

Bapsi Sidhwa (1938) is one of the leading Anglophone novelists in South Asia (Suleri, 2001). She is a diaspora, a post-colonial Pakistani based American novelist who has earned the title of the pioneer of English

novel in Pakistan. Her art has an extensive literary appeal is South Asian and diaspora fiction which was considered earlier to be barren of International appeal (Brians, 2003). Her distinctive style is embedded with diversity and multicultural plurality (Mahesar, 2018). She is a prolific voice in the realm of commonwealth fiction. Her works depict local (Asian) contextualization in comparison with the globalization. Besides, the artist is a strong voice for women and minority in South Asia particularly and in the world generally (Escherle, 2013). “It is striking the best known Pakistani author writing fiction set in the country should be a member of a non-Muslim minority and a woman also, but neither of those facts seem to have interfered with her reputation” (Brians, 2003, p. 119).

Furthermore, she is an award-winning novelist, she was granted many awards like Sitara-e-Imtiaz, Pakistan’s highest award. Besides this, she has received so many international awards like Liberrateur prize etc. She authored five famous novels which have been translated into other languages: German, Italian, French, Russian and Urdu. She was born on 01 August, 1938 in Karachi, Pakistan (that time part of India) and her family migrated to Lahore shortly. She was brought up in that city. Initially, owing to adverse circumstances, it became hard to get her work published conveniently but later on, she successfully overcame all impediments in the publication of her works. Being a dynamic social worker, she got possibilities to represent women at different forums, especially at the Asian Women Congress in 1975. Paul Brians (2003), in *Modern South Asian Literature in English*, sheds light on the novelist’s vibrant and political active life here,

As a dynamic figure, Sidhwa epitomized women and their struggle for socio-political rights in Pakistani society in her art as well as her vigorous part in the society. That is why; the artist was allotted by the government of Pakistan to represent the nation at the International Asian Women’s congress conference in 1975 in Kazakhstan. Moreover, she served as a key member in the advisory committee constituted for women rights and development by the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto. She later on migrated to the United States with her family to bring her illustrious career ahead; she joined a few renowned universities of America as a distinguished professor. Her long and permanent settlement in the United States earned her American citizenship in 1992. Her art has portrayed multicultural identities and diaspora culture due to the impact of her own background. In most of her novels, she critically highlighted the clashing elements of sub-continent socio-cultural concerns in comparison with the western society. (Brians, 2003).

Theoretical Perspective

The undertaken study is grounded on the qualitative domain of research that explores the textual extracts from the chosen novel in the light of the applied research framework to pursue research objectives. This section of the study therefore plumbs into a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical framework undertaken by the present research. The research is qualitative in nature, it explores how and why gender identity is constructed out of socio-cultural traditional norms through the investigation of the two works by Sidhwa from Butlerian Post-Structural gender viewpoint. She encounters the rampant notions that certain gendered behaviors are normative and natural. The pursuit of research objectives through the textual and analytical study of the two novels is to be carried on through the guidelines of the applied research methodology. It aims at interrogation of the normativity and integrity of gender construction which are taken-for-granted as a result of association of gender and sexuality together. That leads to establish the classification of the both through binary concept. More importantly, this conservative concept about gender is not challenged by the traditional feminist and gender schools of thought. So our identity is interpreted and shaped in light of our gender category determined by social standards (Butler, 1990).

The theoretical background of the applied methodology of this research is branched off from Judith Butler's deconstructive perspective of gender that is probed and explained comprehensively for the convenience of readers and researchers of this study. The post-structural theoretical framework of gender performativity given by Butler is implied to unfold gender roles in the novel. Butler is one of the prolific gender theorists in the contemporary world who challenged the traditional gender schools of thought. Her theoretical understanding about gender and sexuality has presented innovative ideas that defied stereotypical stances of feminism and gender studies. Her works generated a heated debate about gender identification. Her renowned works like, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity* and another work, *Bodies that Matter* (1990) earned her an international reputation among the circle of theorists. Her deconstructive approach to gender was actually the outcome of her doctoral research applying Michel Foucault's theoretical underpinning.

Butler (1990, 1999) argues to create 'Gender Trouble' by interrogating the binaries of gender, sex and sexuality. It is one of the focal points of her approach to unfold the wrongly assumed association between gender and sex taken since long as identical entities. Gender, "is not essential, biologically determined quality or an inherent entity but is repeatedly performed, based on, and reinforced by, societal norms"

(Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018,1). To challenge or go against the prevalent notions of deeply-rooted gender stereotyping is like to go against what is 'natural' to them. So that deviation from the assumed concept of gender as a natural is considered as a strange and bizarre. Furthermore, It is one of key ideas in deconstructive gender perspective that gender is not a natural, or objective entity but this is constructed through performativity (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). It is explained as follows,

As there is factual truth behind gender except it is the creation of various acts or actions that generate or create gender, if there are no acts to take place, there would be any gender at all. Therefore, gender is actions' construction that hides its genesis. So gender is a socio-cultural impact that determines gender roles to play in a society. A society that believes in stereotypical gender dogmas, will obviously allow gender construction only in accordance with its traditional rampant rules. (Butler,1990)

Discussion and Analysis

Eco-feminism and its Impact on Gender Discourses

The sun climbed the mountain slope, thawed the rocks and touched back to life the numbed body of the sleeping girl (Sidhwa,1990, p.194)

The aim of this section of the research is to explore the similar impact of traditional gender ideals on ecofeminism and gender delineation in South Asian context through a close reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*. Ecofeminism is a newly theoretical perspective that creates the common bond between nature and women, both being the victims of the hegemonic (Adams, 1994) socio-cultural dominant powers. Therefore, the two schools of thought, feminism and ecology, highlight inequalities and discrimination against both the victims on the platform of ecofeminism. To understand its origins, the term of ecofeminism is said to be coined by a renowned French writer, Françoise D'Eaubonne, in her book *Le Féminisme Ou la Mort* (1974). It is debated by this school of thought that women and nature suffered from alike oppressive treatment. "Ecofeminism as a literary theory is interested in this relationship between nature and women. The theory looks at the similarities between nature and women and how they are both being oppressed by the western patriarchic society" (Lourens, 2016, p.4-5). Therefore the present research explores in this section that as nature with its all components-land, water, air and animals etc. is repressed so is the plight of the people of colour, the poor, children and women on gender segregation.

Furthermore, similarly subservient segments of society and nature suffer at the hands of the patriarchal and gender biased culture. That

is why eco-feminists unfold the identical features of nature and women like nurturing, caring and sacrificial affections can be found inherent in the two. Owing to analogous reciprocal relationship of women and nature, some of the feminists exhibit their apartheid plight. To the Eco-feminists, there is inherently a co-relationship of our treatment to the natural world and women, both face an oppressive treatment by humans who treat them as their commodity useful for survival at their disposal.

Thus, the theory of ecofeminism thus argues to show the relationship between nature and gender. They contend that man for the sake of his dominancy and power, both nature and woman are subjugated and ill-treated on the basis of the taken-for-granted norms by the powerful forces in the society. Tangellamudi explains this by saying, “This kind of development separates man from nature, thus exacerbating the exploitation and violence against both women and nature. This eventually leads to environmental crisis and degradation of women” (p.182).

In the selected novel of Sidhwa for study - *The Pakistani Bride*, the harsh treatment is meted out against Zaitoon whose role has a close resemblance with nature for her vulnerability in mountainous Kohistani culture. Zaitoon, the pivotal character of the novel, is demonstrated as a caring and sacrificing female for her father who never listens to her concern in gender-discriminated tribal society of Kohistan. The pre-assumed notions are replete with the concept of everything for masculinity and nothing for women. In a briefest word, Zaitoon quits her expectations and hopes from the society she is living in after the disapproving attitude of her father. Zaitoon prefers to get to the company of nature on the idea of enemy of my enemy is my friend. She is now no more a typical married woman of Kohistan; no more she is a blind servant to man-driven culture. She has taken a stand against the repression, she is now a resistance and challenge to the imposed slavery to be the person on the weaker side of gender binary.

Now Zaitoon comes to the alliance of nature by using it as shield and shelter against their hostile common forces. As plants, small and big trees are uprooted and cut by the people of the locality as depicted in the novel, so is the harsh treatment with Zaitoon, she found herself frozen to death unless she goes back to that cruel society she has fled from. But quite different is the environment, when she initially finds the solace and friendly attitude of nature that looks welcoming to her. Sidhwa has portrayed that the sun is there to help Zaitoon stabilize the unfriendly impact of harsh weather,

The sun climbed the mountain slope, thawed the rocks and touched back to life of the numbed body of the sleeping girl. (Sidhwa, 1990, p.194)

Here the numbed body has a symbolic significance, it can be interpreted that Zaitoon is dependent upon others like a person with disability. The sun is there to rescue her. So, nature is initially has role of protection and shield for Zaitoon against the common enemy

The sun [...] nuzzled up to the girl as she lay face down, gasping for breath and trembling, and its warm magic calmed her. (p.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. (Sidhwa, 1990, p.212)

The gender delineation is determined by the socio-cultural dominant powers as the social context changes, the transformation of gender roles gets changed accordingly to prove gender as a social construction. The Kohistani village where Zaitoon was forcibly brought as a wife to remain subservient to her patriarchal family, husband and cultural standards throughout her life. The symbolic meanings can be deduced from the novel at a time of the bride's arrival to the village of her husband for the first time, where she is received with anger and barking dogs, large and fierce eyes of children even, the novelist mirrors symbolically this unfriendly environment here, once they stepped within the mud rampant of the village, each house spewed out its ragged human contend and the villagers came running. Three or four fierce dogs set to barking and were restrained. Zaitoon covered her head and the lower half of her face with her shawl. The children, their noses running, their cheeks a fierce scorched red, stared at Zaitoon out of rage, large eyes. (Sidhwa, 1990, p. 134)

How appropriately Zaitoon is becoming nearer and identical with nature, to be exact in description, she was so mesmerized to find herself standing by a river. In the novel, how artfully it is painted by the novelist, "A few hours later, she awoke, unaccountably restless. She had been standing by the river, admiring its vivid colour, when a hand had come out of the ice-blue depths and dragged her in, pulling her down, down"(p.136). Here the impact of nature on Zaitoon's gender is an accommodating, it is an acceptance of her reservations by nature.

Different is becoming the role of nature, as gender roles don't remain static in the perspective of the theoretical framework applied here

- gender performativity. Now, the nature, its other components like trees, rivers, and specially animals seem to be frightening and alarming to Zaitoon. In Onomatopoeic language, jackals and dogs are barking fiercely in open, it is a new experience and acquaintance of the newly wedded bride here. At night as she listens the piercing wail of a jackal and dogs of the village, she is awfully terrified. She rushed to Qasim, her father for protection.

What is it, child? He asked. That's only a jackal. It would not harm you. The girl

Sobbed aloud.....

Abba, take me to the plain when you go. Please, don't leave me here. Take me with

you. (Sidhwa, 1990, p136)

Furthermore, other natural notable entities of eco-system like animals are maltreated in the novel as women on gender basis are dealt. Patriarchy in its struggle for power and dominancy, even animals are not spared (Adam, 1994) from the cruel treatment. Sakhi, Zaitoon's husband is mad in rage while laboring with his Ox. When his Ox cannot bear overburden, Sakhi starts roaring, he fell on the animal. He starts severe beating of the innocent Ox with his heavy stick. Sakhi symbolizes the traditional gender-biased culture that uses coercion to maintain its hegemony and dominance. Sidhwa demonstrates this punitive culture in the novel at the scene when Sakhi becomes mad with rage and violent for his authority. Therefore, his gender's manifestation of the tribal powers is associated with being a male member of society. Now a beast, ox suffers at the hands of the patriarchal culture divided in terms of categories. Hence, this culture of discrimination is imaged by the novelist on nature and dumb animals even, the beast grunted, lifting its neck in pain. Sakhi's eyes dilated and a venomous satisfaction shuddered through him. He hit the Ox again and again, until gaped open. The beast roared and writhed, desperately trying to stand and get away from its tormented. (Sidhwa, 1990, p.148).

Henceforth, the story of gender categorized culture does not end upon the wretchedness of ecological structure, the novel proceeds to mark the force of socio-cultural taboos constituting gender constraints for its weaker segment in power.

To cut the debate short, let us analyze the example of humiliation of Zaitoon, who is beaten severely by her husband. The focal point of the study here to mention is that both- the nature (ecological system) as well

as women suffer badly at the hands of conventional patriarchal system that uses coercion for the maintenance of their discourse of power and hegemony. Therefore, Zaitoon as key character undergoes different shades of identity of gender as she enters in the fold of the tribal culture of Kohistan depicted in the novel. “The Pakistani Bride comes to proposing a way out for the women who are oppressed in this culture” (Marwah, 2008, p.49).

Conclusion

Keeping in view the analysis by the undertaken research, the impact of eco-feminism on gender construction in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Pakistani Bride (1990)* unearths the hegemonic and unequal treatment with the weaker entities, nature and women. The elements of ecofeminism and gender construction in the novel adds a new dimension different from the old and traditional feminist and gender perspectives that categorize and interpret gender within the binary oppositional categorization. Ecofeminism is as a theoretical viewpoint creates the identical bond between nature and women, both being the victims of the hegemonic (Adams, 1994) socio-cultural dominant powers. Therefore, the inequitable and discriminatory status of the both is highlighted by this school of thought. The nature and women both carry the identical traits of nurturing, accommodating, sacrificing and caring with the inhabitants of society.

To wind up the argument, the nature, particularly trees and forestation face a possessive and callous behavior of masculinity in remote areas of Pakistan, in terms of cutting and uprooting of trees for petty monetary benefits. Rooting out nature and devaluing the ecological importance that is emphatically highlighted in the novel, has analogous relationship with the repression of women in Kohistani area. To be brief, lets us see the example of humiliation of Zaitoon, who is beaten severely by her husband. The focal point of the study here to mention is that both- the nature (ecological system) as well as women suffer badly at the hands of conventional patriarchal system that uses coercion for the maintenance of their discourse of power and hegemony.

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