

## Systematic Dehumanization of Women: Cultural Psychology in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*

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### Abstract

Cultural psychology discovers the systematic principles underlying how psychological and behavioural tendencies are rooted in and embodied in culture. The analysis in this paper is restricted to the patriarchal ideology, one of the cultural ideologies that situate women in the realm of power of men. The paper captures the psyche of men and women who are shaped by the complexity of cultures of Pakistan and India that Sidhwa depicts in her novel where men dominate and keep women under patriarchal culture. The driving force behind the cultural psychology of Pakistan and India is the fact of their systematic dehumanization of women over centuries. In the novel *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa depicts women's struggle against feudalist patriarchy and gives a deeper understanding of cultural psyche in this hybridized global society. Thus *The Crow Eaters* focuses on the diffused 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 them, and how women should lead their lives.

Cultural psychology discovers the systematic principles underlying how psychological and behavioural tendencies are rooted in and embodied in culture. Hazel Markus states on the emergence of Cultural psychology: "Cultural psychology builds on one of the most fundamental ideas in psychology: The products of the mind are a function of the social communities that people are part of. Cultural psychology is an effort to recognise human nature and the different ways of being human". The main tenet of cultural psychology is that mind and culture are inseparable and mutually constitutive that people are shaped by their culture and their culture is also shaped by them. Human beings starting at birth are highly motivated to seize meanings and resources out of a socio-cultural environment. Shweder confirms that "The basic idea of cultural psychology is that no socio cultural environment exists or has identity independent of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while every human being has her or his subjectivity and mental life altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some socio cultural environment and using them" (74).

Cultural psychology initiates a recurring pattern of behaviour within specified frames. The analysis in this paper is restricted to the patriarchal ideology, one of the cultural ideologies that situate women in the realm of power of men. The paper captures the psyche of men and women who are shaped by the complexity of cultures of Pakistan and India that Sidhwa depicts in her novel where men dominate and keep women under patriarchal culture. The driving force behind the cultural psychology of Pakistan and India is the fact of their systematic dehumanization of women over centuries. Women's adaptations to oppression continue within the society that have victimized and dehumanized them, and the consequences are cumulative. These psychological processes occur so automatically or routinely that the boundary

between the psyche and culture is obliterated. Outspokenly feminist, Sidhwa's novels bring the attention of the readers to women's situation in Indian and Pakistani culture. In the novel *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa depicts women's struggle against feudal patriarchy and gives a deeper understanding of cultural psyche in this hybridized global society.

Over centuries, women have been leading a life that has been manoeuvred by the patriarchs. They have had their set behavioural roles in a pattern so designed by their biology and culture ever since childhood that it naturally leads to subordination of women. Rosi Braidotti claims, "...being a woman is always already there as the ontological precondition for my existential becoming a subject" (187). The psyche is further trapped to eccentricity by means of myths, folklore and religion so much so that a feeling of oppression seldom arises. It is for this reason that Simone de Beauvoir writes, "My childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy" (103).

One comes to realise that women have unquestionably accepted what came their way and that they have been unable to recognise the subjugation conspired against them by culture. In doing so, they have shown active participation in their subordination. The reason for this is the routine cultural ideology which has made women passive, docile and above all ignorant. Being a Parsi herself, Sidhwa has been a keen observer of the cultural practices of her community that resist women to attain their autonomy. She gives a clear picture of the entire scheme under which men succeed in exercising their control over women. The first and foremost preference of man has been to limit the area of exposure for a woman. 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. She is, therefore, restricted within the four walls of the house. Within this limited periphery she is assigned multitude of responsibilities that mars her ability to observe, comprehend, object or fight. She lives amidst the so many niches, each tight in itself and is imprisoned guarding her home like a fortress.

*The Crow Eaters* depicts women who are situated in particular socio-cultural contexts. The first woman character who is taken into consideration is Putli, a traditional housewife who is conceptualized by the culture with a philosophy that it is her relationship with her husband, children and relatives that can make her complete and happy. Putli is always seen full of energy and it is impossible for her to think of anything else than the role she is in—a wife and a mother. Despite the entire family of servants in line for her, she prefers to cook and serve her husband and sons herself. She remarkably administers the duties within the house and whenever required she takes the charge of the house and its members. She calms her hysterical mother on some occasions and out of concern for her husband, puts an end to "Jerbanoo's extravagant gossip sessions and firmly controlled her ransacking of the store" (41).

This highlights the norms of patriarchal social order, where a woman imposes her authority and sustains her identity through such positions like mothering a son or by her wifely duties. Society imposing its own expectations and norms on women make it difficult for them to break free from the mountain of conventions and tradition. Woman's capacity to bear children began to be associated with her fixed role as caregivers and with it a host of psychological attributes like passivity, dependence, and moodiness began to be associated with it. Gender is a social construction while sex refers to what is biological. Kamala Bhasin says,

Each society slowly transforms a male or female into a man or woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behavior

patterns, roles, responsibilities, rights...unlike sex which is biological, the gender identities of women and men are psychologically and socially. . .which means historically and culturally determined. (2)

Sidhwa writes: "Putli was content. She fulfilled herself in housework and in the care of her children and husband... Blissful in her knowledge, she would, over the years, produce seven children. From the joyous climax of conception to the delivery, Putli would enjoy it all" (23-24). Putli participates in the process of her own subordination since she is psychologically and culturally shaped by the dominant power so as to internalise the idea of her own inferiority. The role of a wife restricts her self-development. The role of a mother does it even more and as Rose Mary Tong opines "sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing" (208).

Putli does not demonstrate to have any definite constructive plan, expectations, desires so as to raise her status in the society. Culture assigns women to give way to the stereotypes and accept them conveniently. Thus Putli is made to perform the routine drudgery willingly. This will is brought about by the conditioning of her mind by cultural ideology, an effort that is in full play since the day of her birth. Man thus succeeds in rendering women fit for lifelong vicarious submission as affected by the psyche of culture. John Stuart Mill writes: "All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of man" (443).

There is no doubt that wifehood and motherhood have been glorified and in absence of alternatives, women tend to accept it as their only destiny. Bhasin and Khan observe, "Women are admired for their ability and desire to sacrifice, to suffer and live for others. This has been a psychological trap for women. Such glorification is like the sugar coating on bitter pills and, for generations, women have fallen for this bit of sugar and accepted a role that has confined, suffocated and immobilized them" (26). As a consequence, such a glorification places Putli in struggle when she is expected to depart from the ritual of walking three paces behind the husband. The departure is too painful and she feels as being marched naked in public. What she has learned and absorbed is that as a dutiful and God-fearing wife, she must never walk a step ahead of her husband but when Putli is forced by Freddy to forego the ritual "she considered this hypocritical and pretentious, and most barbarous" (188). Her situation explains the psyche of culture which first governs women by rules expecting docility from them.

Men do not mind shedding the cultural conventions with which she is bound when a commercial issue is concerned. To varying degrees, man in this novel tries to gain and assert his power over women following pre-norms of cultural psyche. To exhibit an orthodox way of life would certainly be not fruitful for him, so Freddy tends to use Putli in order to mark a social standing among the British whom he interacts with at the Government House for formal tea parties. When she is taken to such parties, Freddy forces Putli to adopt English ways which she finds most difficult to cope with. Putli represents the class of women who cherish patriarchal values and make all efforts to abide by them without any resentment. As Chhatre says,

. . .through the process of socialization and enculturation, woman has formed some images about herself in her mind; cultural values have been taught to her. She is not ready to do those things due to which these images about her will be broken. It is because of these that while achieving the highest position in society; a woman has to follow her

duties, which are prescribed by the society. She tries to make herself fit in that image. (125)

Though Putli is portrayed in a traditional role, Sidhwa does not advocate patriarchal ideology. Her characterisation of Putli accounts for Sidhwa's sensitivity to raise the aspirations of women by bringing about realisation of the manacles of culture that bind her which every woman has to break. Thus *The Crow Eaters* focuses on the diffused 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 them, and how women should lead their lives. The methodology used for presenting the arguments and findings is in accordance with *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (Seventh Edition).

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