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*Theoretical/Critical Essay Article*

## **The Interface between Environmental Hostility and Human Perversity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride***

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### **Abstract**

Ecocriticism is popularly thought of as a unidirectional exercise for preserving nature in its pristine and uncontaminated form. This view is grossly reductive because ecosystems are many, not one, local and 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 humans and the environment is porous, human nature is perverted in environments 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 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, essential to realize that ecocriticism is not merely concerned with the protection of pristine external nature. It is an effort to reframe our interactions with nature not as mastery but as negotiation. If human-made changes have endangered the life-supporting systems of the world, we should instead, as Rachel Carson urges, explore what alternatives are available to us.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, ecosystems, porous boundary, tropical world, perversity, hostile environment

### **Introduction**

This article is an analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* foregrounding how a hostile environment militates against a healthy development of human subjectivity. It is necessary to intervene with environmental hostility to erase human perversity. In the present age of Anthropocene, when the life-support system of the earth is in danger

because of human interference, it is impossible to dismiss as cynical ravings the warnings of scientists like Paul Ehrlich, who, in his book *The Population Bomb* (1968), predicted wide-spread famine and resource shortage due to the rapid growth of human population and the excessive consumption of resources by the affluent minority. Such warnings have become realistic statements because of the increasing amount of ecological information, which the technological innovations of modern science have made palpably true. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* opens with the fearful prospect of a spring in which no birds sing because we have striven to create "a world without insects, even though it is also a sterile world ungraced by the curving image of a bird in flight" (127).

Such writings have created an alarmist situation in which all activities related to civilizational progress are summarily dismissed as detrimental to the survival of life on earth. As a result, nature is idealized as a source of lost simplicity and authenticity, consequently freezing it as a static, unchanging entity. This grossly reductive configuration does grave injustice to the world's heterogeneity. Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* exposes the pitfalls in the romantic idealization of nature and encourages us to explore multiple versions of environmentalism instead, foregrounding how an inhospitable surrounding breeds human perversity. This research hopes to clear the misconception that the alienation of humans from nature is the source of all modern evils. The belief that the ecology movement promotes conformity with nature through total surrender to natural conditions is untenable. Sidhwa's text demystifies Rousseau's myth of the 'noble savage' because there is very little nobility among the Kohistani tribals of the novel. It is possible to improve their attitudes to life and halt their perversities by releasing them from their entrapment within a hostile environment. The human relationship with the environment requires continual diacritical adjustments, and ecocriticism does not forestall efforts to alleviate adverse natural conditions. But these efforts must be made in a spirit of negotiation, not one of déjà vu or victory over nature.

A review of ecocritical literature discloses two diverse approaches to nature and the environment. Critics like Jonathan Bate, Greg Garrard and Robert N. Watson prefer keeping things as they are. They trace all modern evils to one source: the alienation of humans from nature. So, they promote reconnection with nature by suspension of will and consciousness. It is necessary to effect an imaginative reunification with nature in the manner of the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and company. A contrary trend represented by Gilliam Rudd, Hugh Kenner, Dana Philips, David Arnold, Upamanyu P. Mukherjee, Kate Rigby and Todd A. Borlik reminds us that the natural green world is not uniformly simple and purgative. Nature embodies its sublime and pristine forms as well as the ferns, bogs and marshes. No ecological movement should be oblivious of the world's multifarious otherness. The habitability of the planet is the result of millennia of indigenous place-making. The pure and bracing air of England is essentially the creation of man. The *raison d'être* of nature's existence is to nourish human life. So human intervention must improve inhospitable places. Contrary to the general view, scientists like Rachel Carson do not oppose the improvement of natural conditions; they want to fully use available scientific knowledge and avoid "senseless and frightening risks" (240).

### **Methodology**

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* is the primary source for this study. Ecocritical discourses from Jonathan Bate and Greg Garrard to Lawrence Buell, Robert Watson, and Upamanyu Mukherjee are surveyed as secondary sources. *MLA Handbook* 8<sup>th</sup> Edition is adhered to for the formatting style. Ecocritical discourses are surveyed to interrogate the commonsensical perception of ecocriticism as a unidirectional exercise to

maintain nature in its pristine purity and prevent human intervention for personal comfort and profit. This view is exposed to be a hasty conclusion based on partial knowledge. Diverse ecocritical texts are studied to observe that the earth is made habitable for humans after millions of years of human strife against nature. Ecocriticism guards against mindless exploitation of natural resources, not efforts to improve environmental conditions per se. Since ecosystems vary from place to place and time to time, the ecological movement does not endorse resigned acceptance of our subjection to uncontrolled natural forces. The evidence of Sidhwa's novel, combined with relevant ecocritical texts, leads to the conclusion that it is not the resignation of humans to nature but the combined might of human and nonhuman forces is the ecological need for improving the quality of life on earth. It is as much necessary to tame nature's fury as it is to restrain human greed from controlling nature for commercial profit, ignoring potential hazards to life on earth. The novel *The Pakistani Bride* implies that it is impossible to erase human perversity without curbing environmental hostility. It does not contradict the ecological movement's objectives. It instead modifies the ecocritical perspective to ensure the working together of the human and environmental forces for the endurance of life on earth.

### **Ecocriticism and Ecological Challenges**

The Romantics think that the source of all modern evils lies in the divorce of human life from nature. So, they posit reconnections with it by "erasure of will and consciousness" (Watson 41). Jonathan Bate admired Romantic poetry as poetry that "let(s) things be," therefore, fit to effect the "imaginative reunification" of human-kind with nature (qtd. in Seldon et al. 266). William Wordsworth, the English romantic poet and the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who advocated communion with nature after shedding the superfluous trappings of civilization, are cult figures in this ecocritical reunification project with nature.

The Wordsworthian nature worship and Thoreauvian attitude of fellowship with nature have both been oblivious of the multiplicity of natural forms and of 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 ferns, bogs and marshes" (qtd. in Seldon et al. 266). *Walden's* mandate to reduce life to its bare essentials had fatal consequences for Christopher John McCandless, who, disgusted with the complex artificiality of modern society, went to Alaska unaided to live amid uncontaminated nature. He died of starvation within a hundred days from the beginning of his journey. So, despite the evidence of Wordsworth and Thoreau, the natural green world is not invariably friendly to human aspirations. Gilliam Rudd rightly points out that 'green' was the colour of "falsehood, unreliability and deception" in medieval English literature (30). Colonial historical and medical discourses endorse this unreliability of the natural world by depicting the tropical world of India and other European colonies as a diseased world. David Arnold, for example, talks of the "tropical world as a primitive and dangerous environment in contradistinction to an increasingly safe and sanitized temperate world" (qtd. in Mukherjee 80).

The popular version of ecology as a science that equates nature with purity, simplicity and authenticity derives from a flawed conclusion drawn from scientific data because "ecosystems are many, not one. . . . They vary from place to place and from time to time" (Philips 580). Variance in the contours of nature requires varied approaches to nature. Overemphasis on nature's purity and simplicity could breed intolerance for nature's diversity. Bruno Latour voices this apprehension when he says, "under the pretext of protecting nature, the ecology movements have also retained the conception of

nature that makes their political struggle hopeless” (19). So, any conception of nature that only includes its sublime and pristine forms is self-defeating.

Lawrence Buell has observed that “embeddedness in spatio-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 living, how does it affect human behaviour? The answer lies in Robert N. Watson’s analysis of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s discussion of tropical landscapes. In Watson’s study, 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 under the influence of Oberon’s flower juice, indicate 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 landscape (80). 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 debasement 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 the sustenance of life on earth (Rigby 73). Nature requires human effort to improve its habitability. In fact, while comparing “the pure and bracing air” of England with the primitive environment of the tropical world, James Renald Martin says, “let us not forget the important fact that it is man himself who has in great measure created these salubrious climates” (4). There are, of course, numerous literary reminders, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* being the most famous one, that human efforts to change the living conditions may have unanticipated results. But they do not endorse abandonment of all efforts to improve our living conditions in “resigned acceptance of our subjection to uncontrollable natural forces” (Rigby 68). As Todd A. Borlik puts it: “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). Ecocriticism is not primarily concerned with “safeguarding or protecting some pristine, untouchable external nature” (Lousley 158). It recognizes that the border between humans and the environment is porous. It does not posit the existence of true nature in isolation from human beings; instead, it encourages the adoption of ameliorative measures to improve environmental conditions without endangering the earth’s life-support systems. So, Rachel Carson says at the end of *Silent Spring*: “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). Therefore, instead of abandoning all efforts to reshape our environment, we should reframe our interactions with nature as a “matter of negotiation rather than mastery” (Rigby 68).

Ecocriticism is not primarily concerned with “safeguarding or protecting some pristine, untouchable external nature” (Lousley 158). It recognizes that the border between humans and the environment is porous. It does not posit the existence of true nature in isolation from human beings; instead, it encourages the adoption of ameliorative measures to improve environmental conditions without endangering the earth’s life-support systems.

### Nature Fights Back

Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* documents the interrelationship between an inhospitable environment and human perversity. It narrates how Zaitoon, who lost her parents during the partition violence when she was only five, is adopted by Qasim, a Kohistani tribesman. He moves to the plains after losing his wife and children to smallpox. When Zaitoon comes of age, he marries her off to a Kohistani tribesman, Sakhi. Zaitoon runs away from the tribals' perverse life, braves the wildness of the mountainous region, and escapes to safety. The perversity of the tribals 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 humans and the environment is emphasized in the sameness of their felonious features. This menacing aspect of the landscape has its parallel in the physical characteristics of the Kohistani tribals. Qasim, for example, has narrow eyes that "combine wariness with the determination of a bird of prey" (20). Hamida's fingers that ran over Zaitoon's head in affectionate welcome were "claw-like" and "talon-like" (155). Even Zaitoon's 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).

For centuries, the isolated pockets of feuding tribes that inhabited Kohistan had been imprisoned within the Karakoram Range. This isolation and sense of imprisonment had bred in them a perverse sense 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 a 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. Only a perverse code would sanction such brutal, mindless acts of revenge.

The same perversity of the tribal code of honour is foregrounded 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. When he used the Indian-style lavatory of the bank, he left it clogged with stones and smooth-surfaced glass, causing 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 who 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" (22), 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. Instead, he felt vindicated as "[d]eath was the price for daring such an insult to his tribe, blood, religion" (23).

Human life has no value in the perverse system of a tribal's honour, and revenge: "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 it also accounts for the frantic 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 "wholeheartedly 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 spending 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 by 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 defenceless against the perverse code of masculinity as the girl who succumbed to it.

The tribals have features which are only extensions of the rough environment they live in. Their perverse sense of honour derives from the closed world of mountains imprisoning them. Their determination to keep their words at all costs arises from the resistance to change in their environment. The Kohistani tribals and the Kohistani landscape alike appear to fight back against the refinements of civil life.

### **Nature and Human Perversity**

The code of masculinity reinforced by the racial tradition of the Kohistani tribals endorsed the brutal 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" (156). Hamida's disfigurement is indicative of the sufferings women in Kohistan go through in their lives.

Sakhi embodied the most despicable form of human perversity. The most repulsive instance of his perversity appears soon after his marriage. He burned with an "insane, ungovernable fury" when his brother Yunus Khan's taunt meant he was not "man" enough to control his wife. He spent his wrath on his ox when it could not 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", and 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 are loathfully foregrounded in Sidhwa's description of the scene. Appalled at this sight, Zaitoon intervened and managed to hold the stick. But Sakhi's anger would brook no interference. He struck Zaitoon on her thigh, on her head, yelling, "You are my woman! I'll teach you to obey me" (172-173). A little later, he almost killed

her when he saw her waving innocently at the soldiers despite 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 perversities of Sakhi and the tribals are primarily due to the closed, intractable wildness that surrounds them. The sole aim 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” confirms this exclusion of humans from the Kohistani ecosystem. 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 (154-55).

The absolute hostility of the environment towards human beings in distress dawned on Zaitoon when the entire clan of tribals chased her 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 massive “icy stars pierced her face with darts of cold”. At noon the next day, Zaitoon climbed down into a “dark, subterranean world of cold shadows”, and there was no trace of any habitation, only “icy winds whistling around her” (192-195). She came upon a huge vulture with an eight-foot wingspan resting on the frozen cliff. It staggered towards her “demonically like a monster” (207). 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. There were: “[h]ills and more hills Arid and bleak” (208) all around her.

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 Indus at Dubair was a “seething turquoise snake, voluminous and deep” (103).

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, “[n]o 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). Qasim’s deafness to reason and consequence in matters of love and hate and Sakhi’s imperviousness to all sentiments are instances of their complete merger with a savage environment.

The tribal men batter their women and their animals alike to ensure their submission. They are ready to kill to avenge an imaginary affront to their honour. All these perversities stem from the fact that their environment is hostile to human habitation.

The struggle against nature for mere survival kills all normative humanities in these tribals. The link between environmental hostility and human perversity is thus foregrounded in the novel.

### Conclusion

Sidhwa's novel interrogates the popular view of ecocriticism as a unidirectional exercise for preserving 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 laudable, not criminal endeavours. Qasim's improved manners as a consequence of his stay in Lahore suggest that it is possible to improve the tribals' attitudes to life and halt their perversities by releasing them from their entrapment within a hostile environment. The human relationship with the environment requires continual diacritical adjustments. It is worthwhile to note that while foregrounding the inhabitability of the Kohistani Landscape, Sidhwa does not forget to mention that the barrenness of portions of the land is attributable to the mindless hacking of trees, which stripped whole hills of the firs that provided a green cover to the arid mountains. Sidhwa's text urges us to understand what inhospitable conditions make of man. So, instead of abandoning all efforts to reshape our environment, we should negotiate with it to improve its habitability without impairing its sustainability.

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