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Of Belonging, Being, and Becoming in the Bride: A Gendered Exploration of Female Identity Dysmorphia through Migration and Trauma

Sameer Afzal¹ & Bilal Asmat Cheema²

¹PhD Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lahore,
Email: sameerafzal@ymail.com

²PhD Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lahore & Lecturer (English), University of Education, Lahore, Email: bilal.asmat@ue.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author:

Sameer Afzal

Email:

sameerafzal@ymail.com



ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomena of belonging, being, and becoming through the lens of migration, displacement, and identity reconfiguration, focusing on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, The Bride. It explores the protagonist Munni/Zaitoon's shifting identities against the backdrop of partition-induced migration, gendered experiences, and the complex negotiations of cultural and familial expectations. Through the lens of feminist and post-colonial theory, the paper investigates how Sidhwa's narrative reflects the trauma of partition and the resulting ideological and geographical migrations, exploring the formation and loss of female identity within these contexts. By examining the role of gender contracts in post-colonial societies and the implications of forced migration, the paper delves into how Munni's evolution from an Indian Punjabi child to a Pakistani Pathan wife reflects the complex processes of belonging, being, and becoming in a world marked by violence, patriarchy, and shifting identities.

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Bride* is a profound exploration of identity, migration, and gender dynamics within the socio-political context of post-partition India and Pakistan. At the heart of the novel is Munni, a young girl whose rescue from a small Indian village during the partition massacre to the bustling streets of Lahore, and later into the isolated mountains, reflects a broader trajectory of forced migration and identity reconstruction. The shifting landscapes of her geographical and ideological transitions from a Punjabi Indian to a Pakistani Pathan woman highlight a series of struggles for belonging, being, and ultimately, becoming. These transitions are not merely

physical, but deeply psychological and ideological as well. The complex relationship between migration and identity is explored through Munni's forced renaming, her marriage to Sakhi, and her eventual escape from an abusive domestic life. This paper examines these themes in the context of gender-based oppression, focusing on the implications of the "gender contract" as conceptualized by sociologist Simon Duncan. Sidhwa's *The Bride* offers a nuanced exploration of identity, migration, and the complex interplay of gender in post-partition South Asia. The novel traces the harrowing journey of Munni, later renamed Zaitoon, as she is displaced first by the violent partition of India in 1947 and then by her forced migration within Pakistan. Sidhwa's portrayal of Munni's transformation from a young, innocent girl to a woman abused and displaced within her identity provides a powerful commentary on the ways in which migration, patriarchy, and cultural expectations intersect. At the heart of this exploration lies the issue of identity, both personal and social, which is intricately shaped by gendered experiences.

Central to understanding Munni's psychological and emotional journey is the notion of the gender contract, a term first articulated by sociologist Simon Duncan. In his work, Duncan describes the gender contract as the implicit and explicit social agreements that structure and regulate relationships between men and women within a society. These contracts are not necessarily written down but are maintained through cultural practices, familial expectations, legal systems, and broader societal norms that systematically uphold male dominance. As Duncan argues, the gender contract dictates not only women's roles but also their access to autonomy, identity, and self-determination (Duncan, 2003). In *The Bride*, the gendered contract is starkly visible in the protagonist's life, as her identity is subjected to constant renegotiation by the men around her—first by Qasim, her foster father, and later by Sakhi, her abusive husband.

The gender contract concept is critical in understanding how Munni's identity undergoes a series of transformations that align with both societal and familial expectations of women. From the moment she is renamed Zaitoon by Qasim, her identity becomes fractured—not only is she displaced geographically, but she is also displaced ideologically, as the roles imposed upon her by patriarchal figures strip her of any true sense of self. The act of renaming, a recurring motif in post-colonial literature, serves as a marker of her transition into a new, male-dominated reality, where she becomes a passive object of male control and desire. In this context, the gender contract operates as a mechanism that redefines her existence according to her relationship to men, whether as an orphaned girl, a rescued foster child, or a wife.

The experience of migration further complicates Munni's sense of belonging, being, and becoming. Migration, as theorized by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), is not merely the movement of people across borders but a process of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Munni's journey from India to Pakistan, and then into the mountains, is not simply a physical journey but a forced realignment of her identity. The trauma of partition itself—a political and geographical divide that redefined cultural and national identities—is deeply intertwined with her gendered experience, making her migration both a personal and ideological one.

Through her interactions with Qasim and Sakhi, Munni's identity is defined not by her own desires but by the terms set by patriarchal expectations. Duncan's notion of the gender contract becomes evident as both Qasim and Sakhi treat Munni as an object to be controlled, her body and identity determined by male desires. The complexities of her displacement and the ways in which her identity as a woman is continuously reconfigured under patriarchal rule raise important questions about the intersection of gender, power, and migration.

In her journey, Munni/Zaitoon's transformation reflects a struggle not only with national and cultural identities but also with the very notion of selfhood as defined by the oppressive gender contract. Her experiences align with feminist theories of identity formation, particularly those articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), where she suggests that women's identities are socially constructed and defined by external forces rather than innate characteristics. Munni's eventual flight from her abusive marriage echoes this feminist struggle for self-actualization, as she seeks to reclaim her identity and her autonomy in the face of relentless gendered oppression.

This paper seeks to unpack how *The Bride* serves as a narrative of the complex interplay between migration, identity, and the gender contract. Through an analysis of Munni's journey and transformation, this paper will explore how Sidhwa's novel offers a critique of the gendered power structures that govern the construction of female identity, particularly in the context of post-colonial displacement. By examining the multiple layers of migration—both physical and ideological—and the ways in which these processes are gendered, this paper argues that Sidhwa's novel critically reflects the gendered dynamics of power, identity, and belonging.

Migration and Identity Transformation: A Theoretical Framework

The novel illustrates how migration—both external and internal—leads to a profound reconfiguration of identity. Munni's migration and identity transformation starts when the first non-biological man in her life who finds himself displaced "He felt lost in the city, like a buffalo stranded in a railway station." (Sidhwa, 2008, p.44), thus a displaced man displaces a young girl and while her displacement is initially a physical one, from India to Lahore, she is her displaced within her name and identity then once again into the remote mountains of Pakistan. Qasim's discomfort in the urban space indicates a dislocation of traditional masculine roles as he struggles with the notions of honour and culture in and of Lahore. "*The city men... had soft hands and wore polished shoes. What did they know of honour?*" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 85).

In each of these spaces, Munni is required to adapt, change, and often, relinquish parts of her former self. Sidhwa's portrayal of this movement draws on theories of cultural identity and migration, such as those proposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, and Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity in *The Location of Culture*. These frameworks suggest that migration forces individuals to negotiate multiple identities in response to both external expectations and internal desires for belonging. For Munni, the first significant shift occurs when she is renamed Zaitoon by Qasim, her foster father, after being rescued during the partition. Renaming her symbolizes a severance from her previous identity as an Indian Punjabi and a re-establishment of her new life as a Pakistani, albeit one defined by external authority. The forceful renaming and identity transformation also reflect larger national and cultural movements during the partition, where individuals were not only geographically displaced but also culturally redefined in a newly formed national context.

In *The Bride*, migration—both external and internal—serves as a catalyst for the reconfiguration of the protagonist Munni's identity. Her journey is marked by geographical displacement as well as an ideological transformation of self, which is central to the themes of the novel. The notion of migration extends beyond mere movement across borders, becoming a metaphor for the complex and often painful process of identity negotiation. Munni's migration is initially a physical one: from her village in India to the city of Lahore, and then further into the remote mountains of Pakistan. In each of these spaces, she is compelled to adapt, change, and relinquish parts of her former self in order to navigate the socio-cultural expectations imposed upon her. These shifts

reflect the deeper cultural and psychological transformations that often accompany forced migration, particularly when it intersects with gendered expectations.

Sidhwa's portrayal of this movement draws on well-established theories of cultural identity and migration. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) posits that migration involves more than just a change of place; it is inherently a change in how one is perceived, categorized, and defined by others. Said argues that colonial structures of power shape identity, with the colonized subject being forced to adopt or adapt to an imposed identity. For Munni, this is evident when she is renamed Zaitoon by Qasim, her foster father. This renaming acts as a rupture from her previous life as an Indian Punjabi, symbolizing a severance not only from her original identity but also from the history and culture of her native land. The transformation of her name, a critical cultural marker, signifies a reconstitution of her identity within the context of a newly established national order in Pakistan following the partition of India in 1947. This renaming can be seen as a re-signification of identity through the gendered expectations of the patriarchal society in which she finds herself.

In this sense, Munni's forced renaming reflects broader national and cultural movements during the partition, where individuals were not only geographically displaced but also culturally redefined in a newly formed national context. The impact of the partition on personal and collective identities was profound, as individuals were pressured to align with the new national identities of India and Pakistan, often at the expense of their original self-conception. As Bhabha (1994) suggests in *The Location of Culture*, migration during such moments of historical rupture does not merely involve the adoption of a new culture but creates a "third space" of hybridity where identities are constantly in flux, negotiating between the old and the new. In Munni's case, her identity is not a smooth transition from one place to another but a continual process of adaptation and internal conflict, reflecting Bhabha's argument about the "in-between" space of post-colonial subjectivity.

However, migration's influence on identity in Sidhwa's novel is not only shaped by national and cultural expectations but also by the gendered dimensions of power. Simon Duncan's concept of the gender contract (2003) offers an essential lens through which to analyze the forces that shape Munni's migration and the transformation of her identity. The gender contract, as Duncan defines it, refers to the implicit and explicit set of norms that govern the relationships between men and women in society. These norms dictate the roles, behaviors, and identities of individuals based on their gender, and in patriarchal societies, they often place women in subordinate positions. In *The Bride*, Munni's migration is heavily shaped by these gendered expectations. The renaming of Munni to Zaitoon is not just a geographical relocation but a gendered redefinition of self. The very act of renaming signifies her transition from being an orphaned girl with some agency to a nameless female entity whose identity is primarily defined by the men around her—first by Qasim and later by Sakhi, her husband.

Duncan's framework helps to understand how gender roles function as an integral part of the migratory experience. While migration often involves a reorientation of personal and cultural identities, in the case of women, the shifts are compounded by the need to conform to patriarchal structures. Munni's identity transformation does not simply reflect the adaptation to a new national identity (from Indian Punjabi to Pakistani), but also the imposition of gendered roles that she must adopt to survive in her new environment. Once renamed Zaitoon, she becomes a figure whose worth is tied to her relationships with men—first with Qasim, who rescues her, and later with Sakhi, who forces her into a marriage. Her identity is continually reshaped in response to the expectations of the patriarchal figures around her.

The complexities of identity transformation in the face of migration are thus intensified for women, who must not only navigate new national and cultural identities but also negotiate their place within the gendered power structures that shape their lives. Munni's movement across different spaces—Lahore, the mountains, and her husband's village—mirrors the larger post-partition displacement of identity, where the boundaries between the self and the other, the local and the foreign, the private and the public, are constantly redrawn. For women like Munni, these boundaries are also framed by the gendered expectations that bind them to their assigned roles. In this sense, her migration is a process of both adaptation and resistance, where she is forced to relinquish parts of her original self in order to survive within the patriarchal contract that governs her life.

Thus, Sidhwa's novel illustrates how migration acts as a pivotal moment in the reconfiguration of identity, particularly for women whose selfhood is constantly shaped and reshaped by external forces—whether national, cultural, or gendered. Munni's journey is not just a physical relocation but an internal process of negotiation and transformation, where the intersections of migration, identity, and gendered power dynamics complicate her ability to find belonging, stability, and autonomy.

Gendered Contracts and Patriarchal Structures

The concept of the "gender contract," as discussed by Simon Duncan, is central to understanding the patriarchal forces that shape Munni's experiences. Duncan's theory suggests that gendered relationships are constructed and maintained by societal power structures that place men in dominant positions and women in subordinate roles. Sidhwa's novel critically examines these gendered structures, particularly in the context of Munni's forced marriage to Sakhi, a young boy from Qasim's village. This marriage, which is initially framed as a connection to the mountains and a means of rekindling Qasim's heritage, becomes the site of Munni's oppression, Qasim, who "*could not deny the girl. She had brought a strange peace to his heart.*" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 46) ", "*sold (her) like cattle, a thing to be possessed*" (Sidhwa, 2008, p.153).

Once married, Munni loses her name, Zaitoon, and becomes Sakhi's wife, a nameless entity defined solely by her relationship to him. This shift underscores the patriarchal control over women's identities, where a woman's selfhood is subsumed by the male figures around her. Munni's transformation from a free-spirited young girl into a disempowered wife echoes broader societal patterns where women's agency is systematically suppressed. "He will beat her till her bones break. That is the only way a woman learns" (Sidhwa, 2008, p.178). This reinforces the gendered contract, where women are expected to conform to the roles prescribed by male-dominated familial and societal structures.

Discussion and Analysis

Belonging, Being, and Becoming: A Female Search for Identity

The concepts of belonging, being, and becoming are integral to understanding Munni's psychological and emotional journey. These states represent different stages of self-understanding and self-realization, particularly in the context of migration and gendered expectations. Initially, Munni seeks belonging in the communities she is thrust into, whether in Lahore or in her new village in the mountains. However, belonging is denied to her on multiple levels—culturally, as she is forced to leave behind her Indian Punjabi roots; and personally, as her relationship with Sakhi is abusive and denies her any sense of self.

As the narrative unfolds, Munni's being is marked by trauma and displacement. She is unable to find comfort or stability in either her familial ties with Qasim or her marriage to Sakhi. The physical violence and sexual abuse she endures further fracture her sense of self. Sidhwa uses these experiences to highlight the larger issue of female agency within patriarchal structures. Munni's internalized trauma reflects a broader societal condition where women's lives are subject to male control and violence. Munni's identity is absorbed into patriarchal structures post-marriage. She is no longer a woman but a commodity, "*a woman's virtue is the honour of her menfolk*." (Sidhwa, 2008, p.190), this commodification illustrates the ideological underpinning of the gender contract and reinforces the idea of female bodies belonging and become repositories of male honour.

The final phase of Munni's journey—her becoming—is marked by her escape from the village after being brutally abused by her husband. Her flight is symbolic not only of her physical escape from the constraints of her marriage but also of her ideological breaking free from the gendered expectations placed upon her. In escaping, Munni reclaims her identity and her right to self-determination. Her journey from belonging to being and eventually becoming is a reflection of the larger struggle for women's autonomy and the recognition of their personhood in a patriarchal society.

The journey of Munni/Zaitoon in *The Bride* is deeply entangled with the notions of belonging, being, and becoming, which represent the psychological and emotional stages of self-realization in the context of migration and gendered expectations. These concepts encapsulate Munni's quest for identity amidst the multiple displacements she faces, both geographically and ideologically, and are illuminated through the lens of the gender contract, a sociological framework developed by Simon Duncan. Duncan's gender contract emphasizes the ways in which social norms, particularly those related to gender, structure relationships and define the roles individuals occupy within a society (Duncan, 2003). For Munni, her search for belonging, being, and ultimately becoming unfolds against the backdrop of patriarchal power structures, where her agency is consistently undermined and redefined by male authority figures and societal expectations.

Belonging: Cultural and Personal Displacement

The concept of belonging is a central theme in Munni's journey. Initially, Munni's migration from India to Lahore and later to the remote mountains of Pakistan is a physical journey that forces her to leave behind her Indian Punjabi roots and embrace a new life. Belonging, as theorized by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, is not simply about identification with a place or culture, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation between multiple identities (Hall, 1990). In the case of Munni, belonging is denied on both a cultural and personal level. Her forced migration is not merely a geographic relocation, but a deeper, more painful process of severing ties with her homeland, language, and cultural practices. This dislocation from her Indian identity is compounded by the fact that her new name, Zaitoon, is imposed by her foster father Qasim, signifying a loss of her original self. Thus Munni loses her geographical and idendetiological homeland all with losing her name and idenity. As Hall suggests, identity is shaped by both the self and the other; Munni's selfhood is constantly shaped by others who define her according to their own cultural and gendered expectations.

Moreover, Munni's sense of belonging is continually threatened by her relationship with Sakhi, her forced husband, whose abuse denies her any sense of personal connection or selfhood. The abusive nature of their marriage creates an environment in which Munni cannot find peace or stability. Duncan's concept of the gender contract offers a useful lens for understanding this dynamic. The

gender contract, in this context, structures the power relations between Munni and Sakhi, where Sakhi's position as a man in a patriarchal society grants him control over Munni's body, mind, and identity. As Duncan argues, the social contract based on gender constructs women's roles as subordinates within the familial structure (Duncan, 2003). Munni's inability to belong is not simply about her displacement as a migrant, but also about her position as a woman within a patriarchal framework that subordinates her to male authority.

Being: Trauma and Displacement within Patriarchal Structures

As Munni's journey progresses, the next stage, being, is defined by trauma and displacement. Munni is caught in a liminal space where she cannot find comfort or stability in either her familial relationship with Qasim or in her marriage to Sakhi. This displacement is both psychological and emotional, as her experiences of violence and abuse fracture her sense of self. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that a woman's sense of self is often constructed through external forces—particularly men—who define her existence within the confines of patriarchal structures (de Beauvoir, 1949). Munni's experiences of physical violence and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband Sakhi mirror de Beauvoir's analysis of the ways in which women's lives are shaped by male control. Munni's being is thus marked by a struggle to maintain her sense of self in a world that continuously diminishes her identity through gendered violence.

This internalized trauma reflects a broader societal condition where women's agency is restricted and often erased by male-dominated systems, "*in our hills, when a woman dishonours her man, she must die. There is no other law*" (Sidhwa, 2008, p.182). Judith Butler's theory of performativity, articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990), further enriches our understanding of how Munni's identity is shaped by the gender contract. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent identity, but a set of performative acts that are repeated over time in compliance with societal expectations. For Munni, her role as a wife—particularly in relation to Sakhi—is a performance dictated by patriarchal norms, and her failure to conform to these norms leads to her abuse. The violence she endures is both a physical manifestation of male control and a symbolic representation of the oppressive gender contract that binds her to a predefined role.

Becoming: Liberation and the Reclamation of Identity

The final stage in Munni's journey is becoming, which is marked by her escape from the abusive confines of her marriage to Sakhi. "*she would not go back. Death was better than that prison*" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 204). This phase represents Munni's reclaiming of her identity and her right to self-determination, which had been systematically suppressed by patriarchal and societal forces. Munni's flight is not just a physical escape from the abusive relationship but also an ideological breaking free from the gendered expectations that have been placed upon her. As Nancy Chodorow (1978) discusses in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, women's roles are often defined through their relationships to men and children, leading to an internalization of their subordinate roles. Munni's escape signifies a rejection of these imposed roles and an assertion of her autonomy, allowing her to redefine herself outside the structures of male dominance.

Munni's becoming is emblematic of the broader struggle for women's autonomy and self-realization within patriarchal societies. "*Zaitoon ran, and with each step she felt herself freer.*" (Sidhwa, 2008, p.208) In this final act of rebellion, Munni is no longer defined by the men around her—first by Qasim, who renames her, and later by Sakhi, who abuses her. Instead, she reclaims her agency and begins the process of constructing her own identity, free from the oppressive gender contract. Munni's escape is symbolic of the larger feminist struggle for autonomy and

recognition of personhood in a society that often views women as mere extensions of male desires. This shift from belonging to being to becoming reflects the dynamic process of self-actualization, where women must resist societal norms and assert their independence in order to realize their full potential.

Conclusion

Munni's journey in *The Bride* is a powerful narrative of the intersection of migration, gender, and identity. Through the theoretical frameworks of Stuart Hall, Simon Duncan, Judith Butler, and Simone de Beauvoir, we can better understand how Munni's experiences of belonging, being, and becoming are shaped by the gendered structures of power that govern her life. The gender contract provides a crucial lens through which to examine how Munni's identity is continually constructed and deconstructed by the patriarchal forces around her. Her eventual escape and self-reclamation are not only a personal victory but also a broader reflection of the ongoing struggle for women's autonomy and recognition within patriarchal societies. Sidhwa's *The Bride* is a powerful exploration of female identity dysmorphia through the character of Munni/Zaitoon, Sidhwa highlights the complexities of belonging, being, and becoming in a world where women's identities are shaped by the forces of migration, patriarchy, and violence. The novel offers a profound critique of the gendered contract that defines women's roles in society, particularly in the wake of trauma and forced displacement. By tracing Munni's journey from a child displaced by partition to a woman fleeing an abusive marriage, Sidhwa underscores the importance of self-realization and agency in the process of identity formation. Ultimately, *The Bride* challenges traditional notions of identity and belonging, offering a nuanced perspective on the struggles women face in their search for autonomy and selfhood.

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