



Veiled Subversion: Women in Pakistan

Naz Zarger

Assistant Professor, GDC Bhaderwah, Distt. Doda, J&K.

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to highlight the condition of women in Pakistan who not only are suppressed by the rigid patriarchal mind set of the males but are also falsely oppressed in the name of Islam. The women in Pakistan are poorly educated regarding their rights which Islam gives them but unfortunately are misinterpreted by the men and machinery. The stories discussed here present a poignant picture of Pakistani women.

KEYWORDS : Identity, islam, oppression, patriarchal rigidity, subversion, veil & women in Pakistan

Molara Ogundipe says, "Women are shackled by their own negative self image, by the centuries of interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy" (Ogundipe 8). Women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of shared oppression. What binds women together is sociological notion of 'sameness' of their oppressions. This results in an assumption of women as an always, already constituted group, one which has been labeled, 'powerless,' 'exploited,' sexually harassed,' by feminist, scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses. Pratibha Parmar says:

Feminist theories which examine our culture practices as "Feudal Residues" or label us "traditional", also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of western feminism. They need to be challenged... (Parmar 177)

Pakistani society is uniformly and unconditionally patriarchal in which women are viewed as the property of men to whom they are related. Woman's identity and honour lies in the hands of the male to whom she belongs, and her primary roles are that of a mother, wife and daughter. Her rights under the constitution and under Islamic law are denied to her legally, politically, socially and economically. Women's contribution to the family, the community and to national development continues to go unrecognized. Whatever happens in the Muslim world is usually blamed on Islam. Muslim behaviour is always determined by religious beliefs and since most women are backward and do not enjoy rights like other women, it is attributed to Islamic teachings. Secondly, social customs, traditions and milieu exert their own pressure, in creating oppressive norms which are anti-women.

Literature in Pakistan developed a dynamic identity of its own, post-partition period. It is a socio-linguistic link connected to the literature in India and at the same time raises the question of autonomous cultural identity. The present day Pakistani literature reveals the parallels with the literature of the postcolonial societies, redefining and reconstructing the genres and modes produced in the developed countries of the world. The space given to the 'Women Writers' is negligible, when one considers the contribution of their experiments in form and subjects.

Their works are accessible and yet challenging in form; in content, they are at once universal and deeply rooted in the particular experience of its nation and psyche. Some of them are purely subjective and personal in their approach. Their worlds are illuminated and darkened by the vagaries and vicissitudes of the society that shapes them. They are at ease while handling the romantic and unrealistic modes inherited from past tradition, realism, protest writing and the postmodernist strategies. Women's literature, descended from the edicts of the socially oriented Progressive Writers Movements and despite individual successes, writing by Pakistani women as a body is not widely known. Their work challenges the stereotypes imposed on them, as a woman and as writers, by patriarchal culture in countries, both in diaspora and Pakistan.

Women short story writers in Urdu include the likes of Altaf Fatima, Bushra Rehman, Kishwar Nahid, Azra Abbas, Khadija Hussain, Fehmida Riaz, Bushra Ejaz and others who have dealt with the prob-

lems of women in a society which is patriarchal and at the same time an Islamic society. They have highlighted the history of their country from independence to the present times, the political turmoil that has been a part of Pakistan as a nation state, social injustice with women leading to their backwardness in the matters of education, health, employment. All these writers have focussed on the oppression and marginalization of women in Pakistan.

Altaf Fatima's short story, "When the walls weep" combines traditional narratives and postmodern polyphony (meta-fiction and aesthetic distancing) with an overlay of political protest to tell the tale of peasant woman, Gul Bibi and her seduction and betrayal by a Western anthropologist. In the very opening

lines the writer-narrator talks about the slogans painted on the walls of the streets of Lahore, "Wild animals are natural resource: and it is our duty to protect them"(24). Gul Bibi works as a maid for a foreign lady, Maria and is seduced by a guest named John, who deserts her and returns to his country. She gets pregnant and gives birth to a child with blue eyes and jute blond hair. When the local mullah comes to know about how the child was born, he refuses to whisper the name of God in his ear because of his being the illegitimate child of a poor maid Gul Bibi.

The story is ironical in the sense that the species of certain animals were being protected like trout but the human beings were not even accepted by the hypocritical society, "He is not a trout, he does not belong to the protected species"(30). Towards the end of the story Gul Bibi dies with no one around her. Here the writer questions both the offence committed by a poor woman, who for sustenance is subjugated and the society which not only lets her die a miserable death but also repudiates to accept her child.

"Exile" is a poignant short story of rape and exile of a Muslim woman set during the time of partition when India and Pakistan emerged as two different nations. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have been given equal space, stressing on the common cultural experiences. The story shows the powerlessness of a woman torn away from her family and forced to live with her oppressor as she was abducted from her native village, Sangrao and forcibly married to a Sikh named Gural. Through her, the writer Jamila Hashmi portrays the horrors of partition, when she says, "So it was when Gural dragged me away as the result of that mistake, I saw father's head lying by the bank of canal ... I am as helpless today as I was then. Gural was dragging me away"(115).

She became nostalgic at the time of Dussehra, as she remembered the happy days when she lived with her family but after her forced marriage to Gural, she had been living in exile like Sita. The only difference was that instead of Rama Chandra she got Ravana. Many a times she had thought to run away but her constructed conscience would not allow her to leave as she was brought up and taught that a girl once married had to live in her husband's home forever. She knew that she had to walk on the path of life like a person exiled from her native land and from her loved family. Her only solace was her kind mother-in-law.

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