

Sandwiched Between two Faiths: the Critical Analysis of S.L.bhyrappa's Novel Aavarana: the Veil



Literature

KEYWORDS : feminist ideology, Sharia law, religious tenets

Jaspal Singh

Research Scholar (English) Department of Management & Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering and Technology, (Deemed University Established by Govt. of India) Longowal, Punjab

Dr. Parveen Kaur Khanna

Associate Professor Department of Management & Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering and Technology, (Deemed University Established by Govt. of India) Longowal, Punjab

Dr. Arvind Khanna

Professor Postgraduate Department of English Govt. Mohindra College, Patiala

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to critically analyse the journey of the female protagonist Razia (Laxmi) which is full of both cheers, tears and of course fears who is sandwiched between two diametrically opposite faiths. The paper makes an attempt to reveal how the central character Razia fails to breach the Islamic ideology as represented by Amir and his parents. She attempts to find ways to dismantling the institution of patriarchy and religious hypocrisy and orthodoxy but subsequently fails to find the satisfactory answer. The paper thus makes an attempt to reveal the journey of the central character from innocence to experience who goes through a crisis of confidence because justice remains elusive to her.

The novel under critical scrutiny is S.L. Bhyrappa's famous novel Aavarana: The Veil (2007) translated by Sandeep Balakrishna. This novel is a critique of the false ideology propounded by the Islamic tenets in which the shariya law curtails the liberty of women. This work of fiction lays bare the truth about Islamic religion under whose false women have to suffer a lot. Bruce Lawrence in his book *The Qur'an* states that Prophet Muhammad along with his wives participated in the battles of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench (54). He had the trust on the martial prowess of his wives. Razia, a Hindu in the novel under analysis, a converts to Islam to marry Aamir, a Muslim boy. This defiant lady has to cop a lot of criticism for not living up to the expectations of her husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law because she does not stick to the Islamic code of conduct of her marriage. The writer, through this novel, seems to suggest that when patriarchy mixes with religion, it becomes all the more coercive. The patriarchal forces take institutionalized support from religion on the name of religious righteousness that pave the way for bigotry and obscurantism. The writer, in his preface to the novel makes his purpose clear for writing this novel. He states "We can't truly comprehend our own selves or the history of our nation or, indeed, the history of the entire world, unless we unshackle ourselves from the bonds of false knowledge, desire and action, and elevate the intellectual to the state of detached observation" (V).

Razia was proud of the fact that she was progressive and had transcended the man-made barriers of caste, class and religion. After falling in love with Amir she turns out to be one of the most vocal critics of Hinduism. Her father, a true Gandhian detested her idea of marrying a non-Hindu, but her baser instincts prove to be stronger than her father's ideology. She defies him by saying that "people of his generation didn't understand what true love stood for" (13). He puts a condition before her stubborn daughter that if she wanted to marry him, then he must be ready to become a Hindu and change his name (14). Her father expresses his doubts "...someone in some future generation that you both will give birth to will someday destroy our temples" (12).

Amir could not dare to convert to Hinduism because of the rigorous dictates of his religion. His false promises and assurances succeed in ensnaring Laxmi resulting in her never ending ordeal. He speaks in a secular tone "I don't believe in religion, any religion" (15). His arguments prevail upon Laxmi and the mar-

riage takes place in accordance with Islamic tradition. He says "Remember, our marriage is also an effort at achieving a larger purpose to build a society shorn of religion, the opium of the masses" (15). But his promises were only made to be broken as she felt stifled because of the restrictions imposed by the Islamic ideology. She enters into the 'marriage of inconvenience' where her suppression is eternalised with the help of religious false ideology.

The historical element forms the bedrock of the narrative. The novelist has adopted the technique of novel within a novel that divides the attention of the readers between two touchy and sensitive issues. At the personal level, the novel is the story of the conversion of Laxmi. Laxmi becomes Razia after marrying Amir. At the historical level, Razia, the writer, writes a historical fiction to present the reality about the vandalism of the Hindu idols of Vijaynagar Empire by the Muslim invaders. After her marriage, Amir does not even accept a single demand of his wife. She can't even worship Hindu gods because Islam refuses to acknowledge the existence of gods other than Allah. She makes him a plea to eat the pork but he categorically declines her offer by simply because of the fact that it is against the norms of his religion. The religious orthodoxy is so strong that "the newfound indifference in food had diminished the sense of oneness between Razia and Laxmi (88). Although both of them were passionate about art but the only difference is that one was an ardent admirer of the school of art for arts' sake and the other one wanted to use art as propaganda.

Her mother-in-law becomes all the more strict by imposing upon her the tenets of her religion to make her devout and true Muslim wife and daughter-in-law because they have also the fear of excommunication from the community. She recommends her to offer namaz five times daily at a prescribed place, the compulsory namaz on Fridays and the forced fasting from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramzan (18). Her father-in-law is mild but shrewder in taming the liberty of Laxmi. For them, Razia is the zeenat (pride) of their home and she must not venture out of her home. Razia feels that this kind of attitude evinced by Amir and his parents veers close to arbitrariness where the idea of individuality does not exist. This falsity in religious way of life costs them dear both personally and professionally.

One of the most haphazard and ironical situation that emerg-

es in the novel is that the newly acquired religious orientation makes her disoriented. Vandana Shukla states "The wall of religious sanction is too strong and sacrosanct to be challenged by even the existing legal frame-work" (The Tribune: 9). After her marriage to Amir, she, with her gregarious and uninhibited style tries to make him learn the law of equality but her husband only propounds the idea that men and women are born unequal as far as the Islamic religious scheme of things is concerned. The rift between them becomes wider and wider because she is not ready to murder her individuality and creative impulse. She starts feeling that Amir is a 'hardcore shariya husband' who propounds Islamic ideology for establishing stereotypical identities. She threatens to reconvert herself to her old religion in such a stifling atmosphere in which her husband tries to outmuscle his wife in all the possible ways.

Her participation in this kind of 'the anti-Muslim brigade' has made Amir apprehensive and snaps ties with her to remarriage a girl of twenty five years old who is an Urdu teacher in a school. His so-called religion helps him in this venture "He had used the ultimate weapon that the Sharia law equips every Muslim man with" (178). The reformists like Asghar Ali Engineer have the strong opinion that there is dire need to codify Muslim Personal Law as per Quranic injunctions. He states "Muslim women arguably suffer more because of Sharia rules whose interpretation is projected as 'divine' and 'immutable' which it is not" (Islam Gender Justice: Muslim Gender Discrimination, 16). Amir's second wife Zubeida, younger than his son Nazir, strictly follows Muslim norms.

Razia, unlike his second wife Zubeida does not entirely sacrifice her individuality at the altar of marriage. She is the woman who can dare to wear a mini-skirt in place of a conservative veil (burqa). But Razia's act of self-assertion is considered to be blasphemy by her husband and his parents. Razia, at the last part of the novel, seems to have turned more aggressive and defiant regarding her rights. She has to face defeat and humiliation both as a writer and as a wife. As a writer, she is bent upon exposing the truth about the Muslim invaders who have been glorified by the communal historians in history books. She is the Michelangelo for her passion for writing a historical novel. But she has to face confrontation from all the sides including her husband. Her husband just wants to see her as a film maker, but the urge to write a historical fiction was so strong that she starts living at her village Narasapura, after the death of her father who was also a writer. She starts reading the notes of her father that were of great historical authenticity and is surprised when she encounters the reality about the vandalised idols both in Hampi and Narasapura.

The novel indicates that religious tenets and dictates do not change as the time rolls on. The writer opines "...Jahangir and Shahjahan were merely adhering to its tenets, which remain unchanged till date" (13). Nazir, the son of Amir follows in the footsteps of his father by marrying a non-Muslim girl, Aruna who becomes Sarla after conversion. Prof. Sastri, Aruna's father, like Laxmi's father wants a civil marriage for his daughter because Islamic marital laws do not favour much for women.

Razia makes every possible effort to present the reality in her historical fiction just to make the situation volatile after the publication of this novel of historical significance. However, she fails to realize and grasp the truth that the plight of women after their conversion to Islam is only accentuated by the patriarchal forces and not the religion itself. So the veil on the face of a Muslim woman can be taken as the veil to conceal the reality that hides the true Islamic message, preached by Prophet Mohammed who is considered by reformist like Ashgar Ali Engineer, the first feminist even before the concept of feminism came into being. It is all because of the misinterpretation of the Quranic verses that such a situation takes birth. Gender trouble can erupt when one turns a grandmother, especially in Islamic religious contexts. Amir and his family come from the orthodox Islamic community. Amir and his parents are the adherents of the cultural practices of Islamic community but don't strictly follow the Quranic pronouncements. Amir is not aware of the fact that Islam does not preach any inequality between the two sexes. He declares his willingness to separate from his wife by pronouncing the word 'talaq' thrice in a row. Hence, Razia is legally dispossessed and unequal citizen as well as wife in Islamic religious contexts. In the first place, she misdiagnoses the actual situation and fails to find a diagnosis to come out of this social ailment. She can only question the source which bestows upon her the right to pronounce 'talaq' but she cannot find the answer to her predicament. Her efforts to expand her autonomy and feminist ideology fail miserably as she entangles into the web of religion and patriarchy and the idea of real agency has been silenced for the time being.

REFERENCE

- Ali Engineer, Asghar. Islam Gender Justice: Muslims Gender Discrimination. New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, 2013. | Bhyrappa, S.L. Aavarana: The Veil. Trans. Sandeep Balakrishna. New Delhi. Rupa Publications, 2014. | Lawrence, Bruce. The Qur'an. New York. Grove Press. 2006. | Shukla, Vandana. "Muslim Women's Struggle for Equality". The Tribune. (6 October 2014), 9.