

# Revisiting Ecology, Culture, Myth, Gender and Diaspora in Literature

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## Translating the Politics of "Veil": Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*

Dr. Pragti Sobti

An important difference between western and third world feminism is found in their conceptualization of women as the subject of struggles. While western feminists make equality between men and women, the centre of their struggles, third world feminism "stressed satisfaction of basic material needs as a pressing issue in the context of disadvantageous international economic order." (Saunders, 56). Here, the situation of women is perceived not only as the result of unequal gender relations, but as the consequence of a wide range of oppressive situations that transcend gender categories and are also related to race, class and citizenship cleavages. Women's Literature from South Asia and from other Third World countries finds itself at the risky juncture of the three oppressive agencies: racism, imperialism and sexism. Racism 'othered' them as 'non-whites', Imperialism treated them as colonial subjects and Sexism, at hands of an oppressive patriarchy even in native societies, reduce them to machines of reproduction and domestic servility.

The South Asian English writers are well versed in English language; but each language bears a culture behind it,

and the South Asian English writers are not brought up in that culture. That is why when writing in English they translate their culture into the English language and thus transform text from a mere document to cultural capital across cultural boundaries. In Pakistan Urdu has a great literary tradition, but Pakistani English Literature is also rich and derives much of its literary inspiration from its Muslim identity. Qaisra Shahraz, a prominent Pakistani feminist writer possess a distinct and evocative talent to create a feminine diegesis in which her characters come out to be realistic, giving a baroque style to her narratives. Her fictional work *The Holy Woman* (2001) serves as an alley leading to the conflicting issues faced by the Pakistani women. The thematic concerns of the Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* include "Purdah", its association with female sexuality and assertion of female identity in sexually segregated Muslim Society.

Pakistan has undergone a series of seismic changes not only historically and geographically but also socially and this change is reflected in Pakistani literature too. In Pakistan Urdu has a great literary tradition, but Pakistani English Literature is also rich and derives much of its literary inspiration from its Muslim identity. In her paper Asma Mansoor aptly states "Pakistan has been a melting pot of various cultures, religions and ideologies which have all been sublimated into the crystalline residuum of literatures in various languages" (14).

Parallel to other literatures, Pakistani literature in English is also gaining popularity as Pakistani writers have strenuously endeavored to pen down the social, economical, political and cultural upheavals faced by the country in their works. Literature in Pakistan has excogitated its own distinctive ipseity and simultaneously has also emerged as a socio-cultural document of prospects and hardships. The present day Pakistani literature stands on the same podium with literatures of other postcolonial nations in terms of popularity and vividness of genres.

Pakistani fiction has started seeking the attentions of readers since the latter part of 20th century due to its political and religious character. Induction of education for females after independence has worked as a catalyst behind feminine interest in literary activities. Renowned novelist like Sara Suleri, Bapsi Sidhwa, Abdulla Hussein falls into the category of first generation post independence writers, the catastrophic legacy of partition and its aftermaths in Pakistan form the general backdrop of majority of their fictional narratives, whereas the oeuvres of second generation writers like Kamila Shamsie, Qaisra Shahraz, Monika Ali, focus on themes like home-Diaspora nexus, relocating Pakistani identities, re-establishing man-woman dichotomy and many more. The contribution of all these and many more women writers have been noteworthy in broadening the horizons of Pakistani feminist fiction writing.

Feminism has been as integral part of literature. Simone De Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* opines that women in most of the social set ups take up the roles entrusted to them by men. Connately American Human Rights Activist Jill Savitt is of the view that sexist myths prevailing in the society continue for long time and eventually gain uncontested acceptance. According to Mies, "male supremacy far from being a consequence of men's superior economic contribution, was a result of the development and control of destructive tools through which they controlled women, nature and other men"(11). Islamic Feminism is an offshoot of Third wave feminism, rising up since early 1980's. Ahmed and Jahan in their article "Feminist Discourse and Islam: A Critique" defines it as "Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quaranic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality" (1). Islamic feminists like Leila Ahmed, Safia Ahmed Jan, Mariam Aholo have stood up against those discriminatory cultural and social practices which claim unquestioned subservience from

women in name of religion. In their writings they have re-interpreted the *Qur'an* and *Hadiths* and have tried to restore the place of women in Islamic Society by presenting to the readers that no religious texts avouch any form of submission from women. For Islamic feminists the idea of emancipation lies in the freedom given to the Muslim women "to use their moral sense, sound convictions and religious beliefs in dealing with making choices" (Campbell 12). Taking inspiration from Islamic feminists Third world women writers in Pakistan mirrored the images of oppressed and subdued woman hood in their works. They highlight the systematic gender subordination faced by the women in Pakistan which varies across cultures, classes and tribes. Patriarchy has a strong hold over the society in Pakistan as a result women face huge gender disparities in all phases of life. The social order is structured to establish the male pre-eminence. "Honor Killing", "Faatas." "Watta-Satta", and "Marriages to Quran", are the common ill-practices prevalent against women in Pakistan. This patriarchal system legitimizes itself under the legal canopies with help of Sharia laws. Moreover the tribal traditions prevalent in provinces of Fata, Sind, Baluchistan and other Northern areas are also responsible for pushing the women, rungs behind on the ladder of equality. Being victim, of laws like Haddood Ordinance, Karo Kari, Qasas and marriage to Quran the conditions of women in Pakistan are highly vulnerable. Khan opines "despite cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Pakistani women have to face strikingly similar patterns of agriculture based tribal, feudal clan system and kinship network" (73).

Pakistani women writers carve out such female characters that are on the crossroads of suffering and emancipation. These writers tread into areas of feminine subjectivity and focus on themes related to life of a woman from childhood to complete woman hood, struggling against all the forces of restrictions.

Qaisra Shahraz is one such Pakistani writer who has won accolades for depicting the actual condition of women in patriarchal Islamic society in her fictional works. She emphasizes on the history of her nation since independence, the political commotion and social injustice with women resulting in their social, educational, financial and professional retardation. Her works highlight the adversarial effects of injustice, exploitation, power politics, and inhuman treatment meted to women by men. In her works she poses a strong counter voice and exposes dominant patriarchal trends which have subdued the status of women and have marginalized their growth. Shahraz has also attempted to foreground the misuse of religion by men to confine female bodies as mere sites of slavery, in name of culture and tradition. She talks of structured violence which robs the women folk of their identity. Her female characters are found oscillating between stifling customs and fractured identities. Shahraz possesses a distinct and reminiscent talent to create a feminine diegesis in which her characters come out to be realistic, giving a baroque style to her narratives.

Her novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) serves as an alley leading to the conflicting issues faced by the Pakistani women. The thematic concerns of the Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* include "Purdah", its association with female sexuality and assertion of female identity in sexually segregated Muslim society. The practice of "veiling" is contentious, gendered religious tradition associated with a complex array of symbolic meanings. The forced veil in case of protagonist Zari Bano (a staunch feminist) initially imprisons the woman inside her, taking from her the freedom to make decisions about her life, but as she travels on the sojourn of becoming a "Holy Woman" the veil becomes a medium which facilitates her. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" (1986) opines that oppression of a Muslim woman cannot be equated with her

veiled identity. According to her veil is a material practice followed in Islam which can't be held responsible for oppression of woman as non-veiled women can be equally vulnerable. What Mohanty proposes in her study is "the need for analytical engagement with the apparently less explicit, but substantial forms of discursive exploitations as a defense strategy against the generalizing notions of the status of veiling women" (Jadoon 3).

Structured around the rubric of binaries in women's lives in Pakistani society, the novel unwraps the story of a University educated girl, Zari Bano who surrenders her future to save the ancestral property as desired by her feudal father. Following death of her brother Jaafar (the sole heir), Zari's future is distorted by her father's wish to keep the family property within the family. In order to appease the desire of her father and grandfather Zari Bano has to not only sacrifice her love for Sikander but also has to assassinate the beautiful, glowing, zealous and the erudite lady within herself. The male tyrants want her to become "Shahzadi Ibadat" to remain a celibate throughout her life and marry Holy Quran. Apart from that, being a true devotee of God, she has to present herself always under a "burqa" in public. They believed that this will not only give her recognition in society but will also bring name and fame for family. Highlighting this tradition Siddique writes "these 'male tyrants' are depicted as being responsible for the setting of unIslamic, absurd tradition, Haq Bakshish. This ancient tradition is practiced by Pakistani feudal families, whereby a woman (heiress) is not permitted to marry any man (but forced to live in celibacy) for the fear of inherited lands and wealth to change hands" (34-35).

Zari Bano's tale begins in contemporary Pakistan where belonging to a wealthy and affluent family she is free to take major decisions for her life. Unlike the girls of her age she was not only allowed to pursue higher education but also to remain

single till age of twenty seven as she finds none of her suitors fitting in her frame of "ideal husband". Her love at first sight took place in a "Mela" where she accidentally exchanged glance with her brother's friend Sikander, a business tycoon who wanted to marry her. But due to Jafer's death in a riding accident, Habib Khan decides to entitle Zari as his successor, resuscitating the tradition of "Shazadi Ibadat" which ordained that an heiress shall remain celibate. From here her destiny takes a new travesty and Zari Bano, as a holy woman, sets off her sojourn to self discovery. Initially oscillating between duty and desire, waging a conflict between innate sensuality and a newly discovered sensitivity to religion Zari Bano gradually gains control over turbulent desires and traversing the tumultuous paths of duties, achieves the real sense of self-awareness.

Habib Khan's role in uprooting Zari Bano's life and destiny proves the concepts of Savitt and Beauvoir as true who state that a patriarchal society gives authoritative positions to males only and female always accept the roles given to them by men, respectively. Through the portrayal of Zari's character, the novelist has tried to show that where on one hand women in western countries have succeeded in rising to a level of legal and professional equality with men, in third world nations the bilateralism between men and female roles is still prevalent. Women in such countries are bound to take the roles as dictated by men to them. The novelist has sketched all the female characters in *The Holy Woman*, around this notion only. Shahzada (Zari's Mother) is one such example. Shahzada's attitude towards her husband changed after this unjust decision, curbing desires of their daughter and compelling her to marry Holy Quran instead of her love Sikander. Shahraz has very tactfully delineated Shahzada's silent rebellion against her husband. She is totally against her husband's barbaric decision under the name of safeguarding family honor. To save the life of her daughter and to safeguard her tender feelings, she even goes

to the extent of discussing the issue with her father-in-law knowing the fact that he may get angry with her questioning attitude. Her unconventional spirit reveals the victory of her filial feelings over her duties as a wife and daughter-in-law. "I am a mother, but a traitor" (p.70) depicts her inner turmoil. She faces the anger of her husband who even threatens to divorce her. The apprehensions of unbalancing of conjugal relations and anxiety of losing her status in family pacify her, although she never forgives Habib Khan. According to Shaheed and Mumtaz "women have identity other than gender and it is in these identities that they differ. . . . their struggle for their rights as women has to run concomitantly with their struggles on other fronts, notably that of their class-identity" (151).

Shahzada's helplessness is not only revealed on the planes of motherhood, but she is equally helpless as a wife too. Since her marriage she stayed under the fear that if her husband doesn't like her, he may bring a new wife. Her fears are shared by majority of women in Islamic culture. At every juncture of their lives they face the possible threat of dispossession, as the Islamic traditions permit men for polygamy. Thus, giving them a chance to control the lives of women folk. Though Holy texts of Islam permit women a free choice pertaining to familial, social and individual matters, virtually they are robbed of their rights and forced to play docile roles. Multitude of social, cultural, feudal and religious factors forced Shahzada to abide her subservient duties as a wife. But "unveiling" her inner resistance she takes a strong decision of emotional separation from her husband after Zari's forced conversion.

Paying no heed to requests of his wife and daughters Habib Khan orders for the veiling ceremony of Zari Bano in their ancestral village *Tanda Adam*. Silently yielding her wishes to her father's dictums Zari Bano prepares herself to wear the "black garb" [purdah] throughout her life. Her situation becomes very ironic as she who was always against the female oppression

in her life was bound to surrender physically, mentally and psychologically to a custom which she thought was not only stifling but also barbaric. She feels herself impotent to stand against her own persecution in the name of cruel traditions. She felt more subdued because she knew that this practice was not in accordance with Islamic norms as nowhere in religious texts it is written to force a woman to follow celibacy. She knew that she was sacrificed in order to save the family property. Unable to rebel against the congesting customs she feels like a caged bird. On her veiling ceremony she is visited by her teacher Professor Nigat who showers an array of questions to Zari, inquiring how a modern, educated girl like her who believed in upliftment of women, could agree to resign so easily in front of relentless and absurd practice of marriage to Holy Quran which will bound her not only to remain single but in veil throughout her life in public. Zari Bano's reply to her teacher reflects her discomfiting and distressing situation that she accepted all this just for the sake of her family's honor.

The statement mirrors the pitiable plight of women who readily agree to be forfeited in order to protect their family honor (which virtually relies on patriarchal values). Chanter correctly sums up these situations "women are taken as symbols of honor in male-dominated societies and in this rigorous process they often lose their identities" (98). Abu Lughod has noted the link between honor and stratification showing how patriarchal ideology "serves to rationalize social inequality legitimizing the control that some have over the lives of others" (28).

In order to fit into the garb of 'Holy Woman' Zari bano decides to abandon her worldly instincts and desires. But a desire for a male child lies deep in her conscience. Through this speck of desire for a male child Shahraz has been successful in tracing one of the major social issues encompassing the lives of women within Pakistani society. No matter which class they belong to, every family (both father and mother) wants their first child to be

a boy. A male child is regarded more valuable to the family than a girl who is always taken as a symbol of burden and responsibility and in tribal and feudal societies of Pakistan they are often denied the right of life. According to Hina Jilani, Lawyer and Human Right Activist "the right to life of women in Pakistan is conditional on their obeying social norms and traditions" (2).

Shahraz has woven the entire fabric of her novel keeping in mind these burning issues. The tale of Zari Bano's suffering begins due to death of a male heir (Jaafer, her brother) and by the time the novel reaches its end, she is bound to marry Sikandar in order to look after another male heir Harris, who is Sikander and Ruby's son. The nexus of the novel revolves around fulfilling "the male desire". Zari's as "Holy Woman" was the desire of her father, Ruby's marriage to Sikandar was the fulfillment of Habib Khan's desires, and later Zari's marriage to Sikandar again was due to dictates of patriarchal powers in society.

The novel holds a mirror to the traditional Pakistani society grounded on patriarchal set up promoting gender discrimination through historical, cultural, traditional and religious agencies. Women in such societies are bound to shape the contours of their life revolving around the lives of males, be it husband, father or brother. Qaisra Shahraz has attempted to accentuate that male hegemonic structures in Pakistan treat women as beings having "problems" and "needs" but not "preferences" and "autonomy" to act. She has tried to show that religious constraints influence the status of women conservatively in society and these influences decelerate the progress of women. Women are acceptable in the public sphere is so far as they conformed to a traditional and conservative vision of housewives, mothers, welfare workers and service providers. According to Shahraz Khan, novelist skillfully "deconstructs the Islamophobic discourses of the Orientalists,

contests the fundamentalist stances" and engages the reader in negotiating a much needed change for gender equation.

Shahraz has attempted to show that rather than being identified as beings with emotions, intellect and desires women in patriarchal societies are estimated by the roles they play. She analyses fundamental and traditional structures of a Pakistani family reflecting the submissive position of women under the gender relationships; and instigating debates around economic, cultural, psychological and sexual issues pertaining to role of women within the familial and communal peripheries. She also highlights the fact that it is the benightedness, abnegation and distortion of Islamic principles regarding the rights of women which lead towards oppression of women in Muslim society. Presenting her protagonist as a veiled Muslim woman, Shahraz has also attempted to disaffirm the liberal assumptions which support the notion of "burqa" as a medium of oppression and seclusion for Muslim women. Working on the lines of Mohanty, Sharaz has clarified that "veil" in itself is not suffocating, but it is just a ploy adopted by male hegemonic set ups to denigrate the position of women in society. And she well substantiates this by presenting the status of veil in life of Zari Bano. When Zari's feminine sensibility coalesce with her understanding of Islam, she realizes that her dismalness was not due to the veil or due to the imperatives of Islam but were in fact the result of gendered, ethnic and class inequalities prevalent in Pakistani society. Her practical experiences with veil were rather positive. She felt it not only gave her respect and dignity in patriarchal society but also help to unburden her from "trappings of female vanity". Shahraz has adroitly contested the liberal notions affirming seclusion of a veiled Muslim woman by providing her protagonist an active public life with the veil.

Culture in the case of South Asian Muslim countries, is a matrix interweaving religion, politics, traditional norms and social conventions, systematizing socio-political as well gender

roles. Novelists like Qaisra Shahraz through their seminal works like "*The Holy Woman*" try to paint these structures on the cultural canvas of nation and try to accentuate all peripheral and resistive channels of experience.

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