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Women in Pakistani Society: Their Two Faces

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Abstract

Women in the Frontier Region of Pakistani society such as remote Punjab, distant Baluchistan, Sindh and Swat Valley are vulnerable, invalidated souls subjected to severe 'Pashtunwali code' that literally treats woman as property and not as person, thereby reducing them to commodity for man to quench their libido only. Man there wields relentless proprietorial lust and prides over them; a woman is there a rotten apple, unvoiced and undemanding creature subjected to strangulating silence marked by utter lack of resilience. John Keats somewhere expresses his dejection "I'm in a state of mind that if I were underwater I would not try to come out." This is the damned state of dejection that women in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) of Frontier Pakistan. Women there are captive souls of man's square world, too battered for any sense of freedom. Their destiny is under man's control as man disregards them and treats them as living assets and not as humans. They are caught in the classic trap of marriage without dignity and worth.

Keywords

Pakistani Women; Pashtunwali Code; Male Chauvinism.

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I

But there are some
Who are like the Hibiscus flower
So easily plucked
So vulnerable
So innocent. (“Hibiscus” 11)

Women in the Frontier Region of Pakistani society such as remote Punjab, distant Baluchistan, Sindh and Swat Valley are vulnerable, invalidated souls subjected to severe ‘Pashtunwali code’ that literally treats woman as property and not as person, thereby reducing them to commodity for man to quench their libido only. Man there wields relentless proprietorial lust and prides over them; a woman is there a rotten apple, unvoiced and undemanding creature subjected to strangulating silence marked by utter lack of resilience. John Keats somewhere expresses his dejection “I’m in a state of mind that if I were underwater I would not try to come out.” This is the damned state of dejection that women in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) of Frontier Pakistan. Women there are captive souls of man’s square world, too battered for any sense of freedom. Their destiny is under man’s control as man disregards them and treats them as living assets and not as humans. They are caught in the classic trap of marriage without dignity and worth. Ali Sethi in his novel *The Wish Maker* notes that to the patriarchs everything is property: land, labour, women. This plight of the women is given as they are too vulnerable for any resistance. Writes Makrand Paranjape in “She and He”: “To be a woman is to find one’s/ depth within oneself.”

The same is Tehmina Durrani’s urge to awake her inner strength. Bapsi Sidhwa in re-interprets Allama Iqbal’s ‘Khudi’ (self) as not just ego, but

“strength of nature...perhaps the force of god”, that can make woman stand erect and fight for justice, right and autonomy.

But the women in FATA region are the victims of patriarchal indifference and devaluation. They are slaves without voice and identity. Man to them is a mortal god and not a companion. Shahid N. Hyder in his novel *I Lost My Faith* resentfully asks: “What did the thousand years of homilies and chastisement and all the incoming and outgoing of prophets and hoary incarnations. The bombast of what did these ravings do if it failed to keep human male leashed” (Hyder 12). Shahid N. Hyder regards the unworthy men as the monsters responsible for all the excesses committed on women. He feels that between man and woman there is no rivalry or competition but reconciliation and adjustability which is the right equation. Unfortunately this equation is totally absent in the tribal FATA society of Pakistan where patriarchal authority keeps woman leashed to servitude.

Accepting that some stray souls like Malala Yusufzai of Swat Valley and Mukhtaran Maie in *In The Name of Honour* have made some news. But in general, the FATA region is a horrible place for women. The picture of torment, relentless oppression, injustice, exploitation and dishonor finds summary expression in the novels like Tehmina Durrani’s *Blasphemy*, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Pakistani Bride*, Shahbano Bilgrami’s *Without Dreams*. The female characters like Heer, Zaitoon and Tahera are living menageries, caught in square cage of man’s making without hope for their reprieve.

The world is not your oyster

A pearl’s innocence is in question

Where men are bastards

Until proved otherwise. (“To Be Alive” 13)

Tara Patel in the above lines pours out what Taslima Nisrine and Zahida Hena utter in horror of chauvinism. “In man’s orbit woman is an insignificant rot but unfortunately in woman’s life man is a sublime existence, indispensable

and worthy of adoration” (Nisrin 113). Tahmina Durrani despairingly admits that in Pakistan “man is the only available fate to woman”. This is disgusting. This destroys the concept of individual self-dignity and degrades woman.

Uzma Aslam Khan in her novel *Trespassing*, talks of woman’s reputation as her chains. It is the currency that measures her worth. Tehmina Durrani in her fierce autobiography *My Feudal Lord* laments that woman is “honour bound” and she is the “standard bearer of man’s prestige,” without receiving honour due to her. “The ignominy of divorce, the gossip of in-adjustability, the conjugal havoc of the custody of children and other insecurities in marriage make woman vulnerable to exploitation”. Shobha De in *Second Thoughts* strongly feels that “deference and validity” are two components for woman’s uplift but these ingredients make no marks in man’s attitude in FATA region. A woman is there not free in terms of mobility and will.

A free and autonomous being
Like all creatures – (a woman) finds
herself living in a world where
men compel her to assume
the status of the others. (Deen 31)

This otherness of woman is endorsed by Virginia Woolf who too laments that woman is forced to “look upon man as twice his natural size”. Heer in *Blasphemy* resignedly admits “transforming myself from a slave to master of my own destiny needed a miracle”. Drowning to her is easier than riding the tide. This is the plight of women in tribal Pakistan. A woman is there quite a diminutive figure insignificant to herself and slaving to her man for life’s sake.

She is a diminutive figure of solid fear.
Fear oozes out of her body
Constantly filling our home, our bodies. (Deen 31)

Fear of physical violence as a “private matter” and not as a moral offence in Pakistan is woman’s fate. She is put to “animal trainer’s treatment”.

The flogging began.

It was orientation for the new horse

an initiation into the art of slavery. (Dixit 83)

Women in tribal Pakistan is broken, she is humiliated and subordinated as she lacks resilience. “I think I believe/My Siberia is too vast to walk through and reach the southern sun”.

The tribal woman in Jerga-wielding community does not “yearn to cross the fences”. She is stifled to the core and is not able to “stand against the walls”. She submits to status quo. Simone De Beauvoir laments that a woman is not born, she is made. Anees Jung sighs that a woman is made to feel that she is a woman but not made to realize it. Shakespeare sounds horrible, “Frailty thy name is woman”. The Patriarchal Pakistan makes her diminutive and sucks her dry of her buoyance.

In Islam, a woman is not a man’s opposite. She is man’s companion, his ‘complement’ and man is her ‘maintainer’ and ‘protector’. But this Islamic proposition is literally negated in Patriarchal society that legitimizes woman’s subservience. The belief in the clansman is that “the more they wield power over women the more they are hailed”.

Habib Haque in his poem “Sky” ruefully sighs “women sigh and conceal the surge of their feelings” (65). This becomes a privilege to the patriarchs. In *Without Dreams*, Tahera conceals her agony lest her nest be damaged. Heer too conceals her anguish in *Blasphemy* while Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* hides her pains. G.B. Shaw damns relentlessness as the key to indifference that is born in man from what Kiran Desai in *Inheritance of Loss* terms as the waking of “dormant hatred”. Lawrence Francis observes that hate is not like a knife in the hand. It is like a poisoned tree in the hand of those who have not learnt to value other’s feelings. This disregard for woman in tribal Pakistan

makes man monstrous. George Orwell feels “Four legs better, two legs bad”. A woman’s vulnerability to subservience to man is her fate. She cannot rebel and find an outlet.

A woman’s life is a reaction
to the crack of a whip
she learns to dodge it as it
whistles around her. (“Women” 9)

Nothing is going to change the women’s plight in tribal Pakistan not even the religious injunctions and the only hope lies in the waking of woman to her plight like Malala Yusufzai and Mukhtaran Maie whose labours have shown some result in the positive.

II

I’ve to break the chains to free myself
to wipe the sorrows of existence,
I want to get out of this congestion. (“Cry of the Dark City” 10)

The other face of women in urban Pakistan is encouraging enough that woman is authoritative and in command of her destiny and she understands that gender-based chains need to be cracked.

Always looking on
At the perennial feast
Of life. Guests who go
Away still, aching
With hunger. (“Weavers” 61)

Women in urban society in Pakistan are not “cloistered, subdued, unvoiced, and muted souls”. They are the living storms ready to “cross the fences”. Lenin is of the view that liberty is so precious that it should be “rationed”. In urban Pakistan liberty is not license to vulgarity and a departure from noble norms. It is duly the expression of “liberty within boundaries”.

The Islamic concept of feminism is gender neutral without gendered discrimination. “It refutes two main norms: the patriarchal cultural customs mistaken for Islamic teaching and patriarchal interpretation of certain Quranic verses” (Malki).

Uzma Aslam Khan in *Trespassing*, Kamila Shamsie in *Broken Verses*, Ali Sethi in *The Wish Maker* and Musharaff Ali Farooqi in *The Story of a Widow* together represent the typical urban metro society of Pakistan that nurtures woman in liberalist spirit without their undue vulgarization. These novelists summarily refute orthodox trends and offensively defy Mullah-Military nexus that demolishes democratic norms. The protagonists like Dia, Samina and Mona in the said novels are replicas of strong women capable of defending themselves and fighting against victimization. Makrand Paranjape feels “to be a woman is to be silent and sure to know to be secure”. A woman’s security is not pledged to man’s whim. She is born free and distinguished to act free as a companion and not as a slave.

“Nothing is wasted nothing is in vain.

The seas roll over but the rock remains”. This is the firm base upon which urban Pakistan’s culture is found. Mona in *The Story of a Widow* breaks herself free from the compulsion of widowhood. She chooses a man to marry again, then quits him too for her “contentment” or happiness is not in the servility of marriage. She boldly declares, “I am able to handle my affairs”. Samina in *Broken Verses* despises the idea of being proxy of her identity. She loathes “to be caught up in the shadow of his (lover’s) personality”. This confirms her “sturdy independence” that marks the personality of every liberated urban woman in Pakistan.

To be liberated does not require a woman to break loose, to be out of control or go wild. Tehmina Durrani seeks her to recognize her inner strength springing free of restraints from within in defense of herself against male chauvinism.

Domesticity and matrimony are two customary chains on the women. The Pakistani urban novels seem to disregard these aspects of female constraints. Dia in *Trespassing* encroaches upon her best friend's man in the name of liberty of choice and is not dammed for it. Samina never bothers to value conjugal bondage in *Broken Verses* in the name of fidelity to love. She boldly admits "they are temperamentally unsuited for co-habitation". Yet she ideologically keeps haunting her lover. Her love is "addiction" and not a "libidinal pull". In case of Mona in *The Story of a Widow* the woman gives credence to her independence rather than security in marriage.

Reputation and honour together have done great damage to women in patriarchal clime and has registered no opposition in urban Pakistan. To urban Pakistan's women marriage is not bound to reputation tag, it is merely biological in nature and fulfilling at the prospects of mutual understanding and compromise for camaraderie.

We wait no more for a new morn,
just one leap and we will reach the whole sky. ("One Leap" 16)

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