

Dossier of the Muses

International Journal of Literary Studies of Govt. College for Women M. A. Road Srinagar

Writing the Self in Afghanistan: Foregrounding Western and Islamic Feministic Perspectives

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Abstract

Postcolonial feminists not only accuse Western feminists for ignoring the similarities and differences in the struggle of women worldwide but also reject the idea of a global sisterhood. Thus the wider feminist movement within the gamut of the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism proclaims a cultural perspective beyond the Western world by acknowledging the individual experiences of women around the world. Affiliated with Black Feminism, Postcolonial feminists seek to bring issues of ethnic conflict and racism into feminist discourse. In her article “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”, Andre Lorde makes a pertinent statement: “...as white women ignore their built-in privilege and define woman in terms of their own experiences alone, then women of color become “other” which prevents the literary work produced by women of color from being represented in mainstream feminism”.

This paper is a modest attempt to explore and analyse the self-writings of three Afghan women writers: *The Favoured Daughter* by Fawzia Koofi, *A Woman Among Warlords* by Malalai Joya and *The Storyteller's Daughter* by Saira Shah to promote all-inclusive and democratic feminisms that accommodate diverse and multiple feminist perspectives of Third World women. All the three writers in their respective memoirs are seen subverting the multifarious difficulties Afghan women tend to face in their everyday life even as they reinforce the Western Eurocentric feminist ideology that presents the Third World woman as victim to her culture and tradition. The paper also argues how the US interference in Afghanistan and the subsequent fight against terrorism was framed as a fight for gender equality when what is happening in Afghanistan is a patriarchal institutionalisation of Islam and not a promulgation of the Islamic feminist perspective.

The wider feminist movement within the gamut of the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism is shown proclaiming a cultural perspective beyond the Western world by acknowledging the individual experiences of women around the world. This paper is a modest

attempt to explore and critically analyse the self-writings of three Afghan women writers: *The Favoured Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan into the Future* by Fawzia Koofi, *A Woman Among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice* by Malalai Joya and *The Storyteller's Daughter* by Saira Shah and highlight the all-inclusive and democratic feminisms that accommodate diverse and multiple feminist perspectives of Third World women. The three writers in their respective memoirs while subverting the multifarious difficulties Afghan women tend to face in their everyday life reinforce the Western Eurocentric feminist ideology that presents the Third World woman as victim to her culture and tradition. This leads one to arguing how the US interference in Afghanistan and the subsequent fight against terrorism was framed as a fight for gender equality when what is happening in Afghanistan is a patriarchal institutionalisation of Islam and not a promulgation of the Islamic feminist perspective.

There is no gainsaying the fact that racism and colonialism promote a wider viewpoint of the complex layers of oppression on the non-white, non-western women in the postcolonial world. The universalizing tendencies of mainstream feminist ideology have been questioned as the term woman is now being defined not only by her gender but also by her social class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference. As such feminism in third world countries originates as a critique of feminist theories in developed countries. Accusing Western feminists of theoretical reductionism with regard to Third World women, Ethel Crowley makes a pertinent statement in this context: "Western feminism is lacking when applied to non-western societies...freedom does not mean the same thing to all the women in the world." Crowley, Andre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Trinh T Minh-ha, Gayatri Spivak, Rey Chow, Rosario Castellanos and Cheryl Johnson are all for formulating strategies to highlight the lack of representation of women of colour in feminist scholarship. Together these Postcolonial feminists underscore the differences in the socio-cultural positions of women responsible for producing different problems and responses notwithstanding the same broad issues. Not only do these women writers accuse Western feminists for ignoring the similarities and differences in the struggle of women worldwide but also reject the idea of a global sisterhood. Thus the wider feminist movement within the gamut of the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism proclaims a cultural perspective beyond the Western world by acknowledging the individual experiences of women around the world. Affiliated with Black Feminism, Postcolonial feminists seek to bring issues of ethnic conflict and racism into feminist discourse. In her article "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", Andre Lorde makes

a pertinent statement: "...as white women ignore their built-in privilege and define woman in terms of their own experiences alone, then women of colour become "other" which prevents the literary work produced by women of colour from being represented in mainstream feminism". Critiquing the tendency to use Western models of societies as a framework for the rest of the world without realizing that feminism in third world countries stems from internal ideologies and socio-cultural factors, Postcolonial feminism has emerged as a watershed event in the history of feminism by establishing the contours of feminism for us as postcolonial subjects and as women of colour.

Posing a challenge to mainstream White feminism that either marginalised or subsumed the voices of women of colour within its larger discourse, women writers like Toni Morrison, Andre Lorde, Jean Rhys, Flora Nwape, Chinamanda Adichie, Alice Walker, Urvashi Butalia, Mahasweta Devi to name a few exemplify Bill Ashcroft's and Gareth Griffith's phrase: *The Empire Writes Back* by offering a social critique of institutionalised patriarchy. Their experimental narrative styles, subverting racial and sexual binaries, capturing the strong spirit of women protagonists under duress, exploring themes like arbitrariness of law, unearthing the chilling but unheard tales of women survivors of the partition and exposing the power dynamics of sex, economics and culture as collective forms of tyranny all help us understand feminism in our socio-cultural and geographical context.

Anne McClintock remarks: "Nationalism is...constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power." Gender and the women question have been at the heart of postcolonial studies from the very beginning. Anticolonial struggles for nationalism used the figure of woman to symbolize the nation unfolding a significant role for woman in the process of nation-building and decolonization. Self-writing as such emerged as an important phenomenon because it merged the personal and national narratives claiming a degree of authenticity and credibility. Historians of gender studies have highlighted the importance of autobiographical writings as valuable and heuristic sources of the subjectivities of women. Focusing on the relationship between gender, genre and historical circumstances, the memoir as a fluid form of self-expression opened up new literary vistas for women to write back, in the words of Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, to the West and more importantly write back to the Arab patriarchy. As a meta-textual account, the memoir offers an opportunity to women to express their subjectivity and contribute to social justice movements concerned with resistance.

Fawzia Koofi, Malalai Joya and Saira Shah, the three Afghan women writers in their respective memoirs: *The Favoured Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan into the Future*,

A Woman Among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan who Dared to Raise Her Voice and *The Storyteller's Daughter* search for a female selfhood within the boundaries set up by the Afghan patriarchal discourse. Together the memoirs reveal not only the complexity and the specificities of female experience within the primary structures of power inherent in the Afghan socio-cultural milieu but also foreground Afghan history in the aftermath of the fall of monarchy, the subsequent Russian invasion, the civil war when Mujahideen factions were fighting one another, the rise of Taliban and the involvement of the US and UK after 9/11.

Fawzia Koofi shares her awe-inspiring story—a story where she rose to become the first female Speaker of Afghan Parliament and a leading contender for Afghan Presidency despite a childhood of abuse, the murders of her father, brother, husband and numerous attempts on her life. There are instances in *The Favoured Daughter* where Koofi shows respect for the culture that the Afghan women are living in by highlighting the resilience, values and culture of the Afghan people. We get the sense through Koofi's effective illumination of the Afghan customs, habits and practices that women in Afghanistan were accorded respect and dignity. In fact, this ideological tug-of-war is evident in her approach towards the Burqa where on the one hand she abhors it in terms of the Eurocentric world view and on the other hand shows some inclination towards it. So much so the subjugation of women under the regressive regime of Taliban is shown as an integral part of the Afghan history, the wisdom behind which, Koofi believes shall remain unfathomable to Westerners. Also Koofi defends her father for beating up his wife but then censures Taliban for their oppression of women. Notwithstanding the stark ambivalence in Koofi's attitude, *The Favoured Daughter* chronicles the hardships of a woman in a battered country and points out varying ways in which women continue to be marginalized. Women here are no longer seen as a homogenous population sharing a common identity based on a shared experience of oppression. Instead the status and roles of women are shown varying according to complex interactions between factors like ethnicity, class, culture and religion.

Although the memoirs fall within the category of a bildungsroman yet the chronological sequence of Koofi's story of life from her birth into a patriarchal society in Northern Afghanistan through a troubled quest of identity into adulthood is broken by letters to her daughters—letters which, as she writes, are to be read in the event of her death; letters which embody her values, her patriotism, her Muslim faith and possible approaches to end the despair and devastation ravishing the country. The chronological sequence is thus deconstructed. In one of the multiple reviews of *The Favoured Daughter*, Koofi's reflections and commentary on the events that occurred in her youth are said to be those of her as an adult today and therefore it is said that her reflections come across as contrived and hollow in the memoir. The

fact of the matter is that we are given a double rather a dialogic perspective that layers innocence on experience, introspection on hindsight.

Malalai Joya named one of Time's Magazine's 100 most influential people of 2010 unfolds her ravaging story of being raised in the refugee camps of Iran and Pakistan. Her altruistic propensity led her to teach Afghan girls surreptitiously and establish a free medical clinic and an orphanage in her poverty-stricken province, Farah. Her grit and gumption led her to become the youngest person elected to Afghanistan's new Parliament. Her persistent and scathing critique of the warlords and drug barons were the cause of her suspension from Parliament. Nonetheless, she has survived four assassination attempts. She writes: "My story is the story of a generation. For the thirty years I have been alive—my country has suffered from the constant scourge of war. Most Afghans my age and younger have only known bloodshed, displacement, and occupation." *A Woman Among Warlords* tells the story of all struggling people in Afghanistan. Malalai adopts the alias Joya when she takes on the mantle of an underground activist. Sarwar Joya we learn was an Afghan writer, poet and a non-conformist who was incarcerated for 24 years because he did not compromise his democratic principles. The memoir revolves around the three decades of oppressive rule in Afghanistan. Joya rewrites the history of Afghanistan and holds the Soviets and Americans responsible for their exploitation and branding of Afghans as backward, terrorists and criminals. Joya seizes the lost truth—the 'other' in history and undercuts the European narrative that justice would return to Afghanistan once the Taliban are vanquished and driven out of power. Instead the memoir makes it quite explicit that the US led war on terror is a war against the Afghan people. Afghan is portrayed by Joya as a nation caught between the Taliban and the US/NATO forces and their warlord friends and Afghans as victims of terrorism. Her persistent criticism is directed not only at the warlords and drug barons in the puppet government of Hamid Karzai but also at Taliban for their uncanny oppression of women. She objects to the burqa as a form of sexist patriarchal oppression and a shroud for the living.

Saira Shah is the English-born daughter of an Afghan aristocrat who at the age of 21 captures the war between the Soviets and the Afghan resistance as a front-runner correspondent. Torn between two selves which Shah describes in the following words: "Two people live inside me....My Western side is a sensitive liberal, middle-class pacifist. My Afghan side I can only describe as a rapacious robber baron", she blends the genres of memoir, travelogue and front-line reporting to search for her cultural heritage.

Raised in England, Shah in *The Storyteller's Daughter* is eager to discover the truth behind the stories told to her by her father about Afghanistan. The stories are grounded in her father's faith

in the long-held beliefs and traditions of Afghanistan. A writer of Sufi fables, her father has sketched a pristine portrait of Afghanistan with its astounding minarets, lush gardens and the snow-topped mountains of Hindu Kush in her imagination. His romantic vision of Afghanistan is interwoven with his faith in what he believes to be the noble aspiration of the Mujahideens to fight the invaders. However the Afghanistan that she encounters on her arrival is a war-torn outpost of cold war conflict. She discovers that her father's image of Afghanistan is a half-baked and truncated one as it represents the male vision and very conveniently eschews the reality of Afghan women. In *The Storyteller's Daughter*, Shah completes the untold story of her father only to recreate the horrors of Afghan life and the brutally cruel repression of women under the Taliban in vivid detail. Shah resorts to myths to make her experience intelligible to ourselves. Her father's fables cease to have any probability and credibility in the face of the political turbulence and turmoil she experiences in Afghanistan. Despite her realization that women in the traditional Muslim family of her Uncle's household wield more power, Shah fails to reconcile her father's mythical tales about Afghanistan with the factual reality she confronts. Eventually her preconceived notions of Afghanistan and inability to comprehend the socio-cultural reality of this war-torn nation because of her upbringing within the circle of Western culture, leave her confounded. She remarks, "Afghanistan has confounded me as it has always confounded the West."

A significant testimony of a gynocentric view of the Afghan reality, the memoirs are an account of strong, young, independent and idealistic women who dent the false consciousness perpetrated throughout Imperial feminism that people in the third world do not know what is best for them. The three texts revolve around powerful women protagonists who as historical subjects question the subjugation of women within the larger socio-cultural context of Afghanistan. Their tales provide an evocative portrait of the social and institutional underpinnings of gender discrimination, the physical and psychological trauma of women and the socio-political upheavals of Afghanistan. The underlying assumption in all the three memoirs is to uphold the Western models of societies as a framework to save the Afghan women from their inherently oppressive cultural patriarchy. That having said, there are passages in the respective memoirs showing how the distortion of Islam devolved into the blatantly cruel repression of women.

It is pertinent to quote Sherin Saadallah who remarked that "Whenever she uses the term 'Arab feminism' it generally elicits such questions from American feminists as "Can you be a feminist if you're still veiled?" and "How can a Muslim woman be a feminist if she shares her husband with three other wives?" The neo-colonial view that paints Muslim women as

oppressed, Muslim men as beasts to be restrained and a new white man's burden as rescuing the former from the latter seems to have clouded the judgement of writers. They rely on this world-view as a knight-in-the-shining-armor who will rescue them from the shackles of institutionalised patriarchy which they believe is a legacy of the Islamic state that Taliban wishes to establish. However, Islam never stood for oppression for women. It has always stood for their rights. Women have always been an active part of the civic sphere of the community in Medina. This has been well corroborated in *If The Oceans Were Ink* by Carla Power in the following words: "The Sheikh's masterpiece collapses the opposition between women's rights and Islam. All forty volumes of his work, *al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, stand as proof that women's freedoms are intrinsically part of Islamic traditions, and have been for centuries. Much like the work of Islamic feminists, his discoveries underscore that it is often patriarchal culture, not Islamic tenets, restricting women."

The Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings. In fact this fundamental tenet of equity between women and men has been subverted by patriarchal postulates and practices. Men, it is believed, have interpreted the Sharia in the light of pre-Islamic customs and have customised these to meet their own interests. Driven primarily by the question of gender justice and hermeneutical reform, the contemporary discourse on Islam that goes by the name of Islamic feminism critically engages with Islamic sacred texts (the Qur'an and Sunnah) and subtly challenges the dominant interpretive tradition (i.e., exegesis, jurisprudence, Hadith compilations, etc.) that are discriminatory against women. The central tenet of this school is to produce knowledge that champions the case for gender equity and justice from within an Islamic paradigm and show how its critical engagement with the interpretive tradition need not be seen as waving the white flag before the modern secular and Western ideals. Although Islamic feminists like Amina Wadud, Rifat Hassan and Saudi Arabian Fatima Naseef based their arguments for gender equity on the fundamental Islamic text, the Qur'an yet some Islamic feminists like the Lebanese Aziza-al Hibiri and the Pakistani Shaheen Sardar Ali scrutinised the Sharia-backed laws whereas the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and Turkish Hidayat Tuksal relied on the Hadith.

The memoirs of these three Afghan women writers display not only a colonial-induced conflict of Afghanistan but also show that women in this torn-ridden zone do not live under the same circumstances as women from Western cultures. However, the writers fail to challenge Western ethnocentricity and by and large associate Afghanistan's oppression of women with the signifiers of Islam rather than depicting them as victims of the Afghani traditional culture.

The focus on the burqa-clad woman or the traditional practice of veiling as a form of oppression cannot be perceived from the Western feminist perspective and certainly cannot be used as a ploy for the US interference in Afghanistan to fight for the rights and dignity of women. To view the veiled Muslim woman as justification for the US war on terror reminds one of the British rule in South Asia that was justified to stall practices like child marriage and Sati.

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