

CELEBRATING THE ORDINARY IN THE EXTRAORDINARY STORIES OF WOMEN WRITERS OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The article attempts to see parallels between the writings of women in India and Pakistan who are now speaking of the ordinary realities of the common people and not writing with any political or cultural agenda. They are not projecting realities for the western reader nor looking at things with the western-impacted borrowed perspective.

Keywords:- writings of women, political or cultural agenda.

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Much of the writing of women writers in both India and Pakistan is now preoccupied with celebrating the ordinary as compared to the exotic, the wondrous as it did earlier. This is partly due to the fact that women writers now choose to mirror the realities of the society they are living in, rather than adhere to the demands of the western reader or the western critic. For long the dictates of the west moulded and shaped the writings of the subcontinent. Hence they always celebrated the ‘otherness’ which normally prescribed to overt feminist concerns of gender, women’s space, their identity and their voices. Hence such stereotypical literatures that seemed to still cling to prescribed perceptions of reality as seen from borrowed western lenses that were often dismissed as other by the writers of the vernacular languages, do not find many takers. Writers writing in their native language were critical of the “western hangover”- borrowing the colonial language to voice the realities of their own people, of trying to fit realities into the compartments of western definitions. Hence, for long, women’s writing that did not overtly seem to be feminist would not be chosen in the canon of women’s writing and so they would not figure in anthologies. Thus in rewriting Sita’s story the figure of Sita would be twisted to suit the western lenses. However women writers are now questioning the validity of interpreting one’s own realities through western perspectives. Madhu Kishwar, for instance, while writing about Sita, is pleading to rescue the story of Sita from western feminist prescriptions and is also trying to reinstate her as a modern, perceptive and intelligent woman and not cast her in the male-

denominations that have been happening for centuries. It is time that we do not revert to the other extremes in order to avoid one. She pleads that we must take “civilizational specifics” [In Search of Sita, 107] and not let the western feminist ideologies determine our theories and realities.

Women writers are now preoccupied with recreating the ordinary and the everyday reality to show life as it is lived for thousands of women and thousands of men. The focus is no longer to write exclusively for the western reader but also to engage their own readers and so stories now do not speak of the element of exotic or the mysterious, but of the small victories, joys and sorrows of ordinary life. As in India, women writers in Pakistan are also forced and compelled to choose English as the bridging language in a country which is not a “monolithic bloc” [Neither Night nor Day, xi] either in its language or cultural identities. English is the only language through which they can reach a larger reader base and find a solution to their plural identities. The three stories that are taken up are actually engaged in showing the ordinary, the everyday and the commonplace realities. They show their characters with their minor foibles and flaws, their small, unsung heroics and courage and their articulations and silences that give a glimpse of the concerns that engage the women writers in Pakistan today. The three stories, Nayyara Rahman’s “The Job Application”, Zahida Hina’s “She who went Looking for Butterflies”, Sabyn Javeri-Jillani’s “Neither Night nor Day” are some of the stories that recreate the beauty of life, the intricacies of human emotions, the complexities and the mysteries of life that makes everyday so beautifying, mystifying and appealing.

The first one, Nayyara Rahman’s “The Job Application” is a slice of everyday life. The travails of a single mother’s search for a better paying job lands her in an upmarket area in Karachi, and she faces the snobbish behaviour of the interviewer and the others. Narrated in first person, the story poignantly recounts the tale of a single parent’s struggle to make ends meet. Acutely conscious of her middle-class background, the protagonist, Farzana Ansari is almost intimidated by the rather distinctly upper-class voice of the caller who informs her that though she is overqualified for the job, the latter would like to meet her. This sends the rather diffident narrator into a flurry who gets down to selecting the dress that she would wear and other fundamental preparations that she had to make to accommodate her son during the time she was away for the interview. She is too excited, “All those diplomas, all those expensive evening courses at haughty institutes, all those long walks to second-hand bookshops were finally bearing fruit.”[102] and it takes her a lot of deliberation to settle for the choice of dress to wear for the interview. Her choice of dress amply illustrates that she is the unassertive woman one sees everywhere. The dress that she chose was the “talisman and an assurance of success” [104] and she is certain that the dress would probably bring her the success that she desires.

As she prepares and recalls the hard life that she had led in the past which was evidenced by the certificates, she unfolds the history of each one. All were a testimony to an eventful twist of her life, “Secretarial diploma: Haroon was only two months old. Conversational English certificate: my father had developed bronchitis mid-way through the course. Typing certificate: I had burnt my hand while ironing. Diploma in Computer Basics: I had paid the first rent on the house.”[104] So each represented a minor victory and represented her heroic battles. With all these preparations, she gets ready for the unknown, and her dreams for her son’s better schooling and future are pinned to this job. The monosyllabic and dismissive replies to her queries about the location of the place prepare the reader for the events that follow. Her epic journey is filled with its own adventures and travails, “Sand filled my sandals. The sun blinked cruelly.”[106]. As she walks in those lanes trying to locate the address, she is aware that she is in a completely different world of tall buildings, luxuries and riches, a world that is completely alien and

unfriendly and which she is hoping to inhabit but might never be hers. Even their manner of speech is very different. She notices that they all have the same drawling stretched speech. Tired, exhausted and thirsty, she sees signposts of snobbishness and arrogance-- the rude man in the Honda civic, the unsmiling receptionist, the prejudiced interviewer and the helpless boss all show that her efforts are wasted and that her pleas fall on deaf ears. Ironically the recruiter, who is a man, is more willing to help than the woman interviewer who prepares a story and reconstructs her story very cunningly to not allow her to refute these reconstructions. What goes against the protagonist is her ordinary background, the locality that she lives in, which is a stark contrast to this other world. The divide between her world where women work to support themselves and this world where women work to kill time, to flaunt their assets is unbridgeable. The Karachi that she lives in is not the Karachi of this world. The same city means so many different things to different people and these people inhabit so many different worlds. Material gains and monetary advantages divide people and the city.

The second story, Zahida Hina's "She Who Went Looking for Butterflies", translated by Sami Rafiq from Urdu, is the poignant story of a mother, on her death row and her final moments with her son. Narrated from the perspective of the mother, there is no indication why this woman is condemned to die, or what is the sin that she has committed which has brought this severe punishment on her. The writer does not dwell on these aspects because these are not her focal point of the story and also in these final moments the woman has moved beyond all fears and all trappings of life. She is above all roles- either of a daughter or a sister and hence refuses to appeal for mercy and it is the mother in her that still retains the last bindings to her life. She is ready to liberate herself and release herself from her earthly bounds and hunt for the butterflies that she promises her son she is going to do. By eschewing all other things, Zahid Hina, avoids making political comments or launch into a tirade against the institutions or systems of governance. Instead she concentrates on the mother and the son who share the most beautiful relationship suggested by the title itself; the butterflies suggest the ephemeral nature of her life, that is going to end soon and also the beauty of the bond between the mother and the son. Her ordinary tale of courage and quiet dignity becomes extraordinary in her refusal to surrender or yield to the impulse of fear. Narjis, the protagonist, is not scared or afraid of death. She refuses to appeal for mercy, which astounds everyone around her, "What kind of woman was this, who had not challenged the death sentence by appealing for mercy, who had not shed a tear on entering the death cell, neither screamed nor cursed God or the jailor or anyone?"[27] She chose death and being a "prisoner of conscience" [26] she would not appeal for mercy or betray any signs of fear. She was not resigned to her fate out of despair but chose it willingly. She knew that she would continue to live in her son which gives her greater hope and probably gives more meaning to her life than what the earthly existence does, which anyway, would soon end. She feels that the life that continues in her son is "her victory over death"[31] She stores the images of life as she lives the last day of her life, as she walks towards her death- the image of the tears of her brother that washed the soiled and dirty hands of her son, the image of the fading moon, and the break of dawn, the disappearing morning-star, and her beloved son playing with the fairies in his slumber.

The image of the butterfly also suggest her yearnings- her desire for release and for liberation from man-made rules and regulations. She tells her son that she would hunt for the butterfly of freedom, which has the "seven colours of rainbow"[30] The motif of the flower of hope that blooms in her, in her son further suggests that the tale is not about ugliness and bitterness of death but about the beauty of life, the beauty of eternity and the celebration of

colours in the rainbow and the butterfly. Narjis, in her defiance of death and refusal to surrender to fear, has created beauty all around her –in the beautiful bond that she has created with her son, with the other inmates who become calm and silent but are violent and quarrelling otherwise, in her life, which though is going to end but will resurrect in her son, in her flight for freedom, in her search for Haseen, her husband, who too died fearlessly, and in the search for the butterfly of freedom. Even in her final moments when she is about to be executed, she sees beauty around her- in the son, who is probably playing with the fairies in his sleep, and in the cool dawn of May; and as the sun rises her release into another world of freedom and eternity and her resurrection into life eternal.

The other story, “Neither Night Nor Day”, written by Sabyn Javeri-Jillani, grapples with issues that forms the core of a consciousness that is at the cross-roads of culture hence the crisis of identity and spaces become predominant. The protagonist, born in Pakistan, living in London, is unable to decide what her identity is, “East, West, Pakistan, Britain, Paki, Paki-British, British-Paki, British?” [Jalil, p 60]. She is aware that she is at an intersection. Like the clothes that she wears- her jeans, jacket and her high-heeled boots pronounce her preferences clearly but the smell of the curry clings to her, and she swears by Bollywood films and songs. She cannot comprehend or participate in the causes or issues like wars in Palestine or Iraq that engage other Muslims. She would neither wear the hijab or the chador that proclaim the modesty of other Muslim women and also becomes a symbol of their identity as they insist on wearing it to protest against the white insistence on removing it. The white who asks her if she is lost actually poses a valid question to her. The trip to the Tooting neighbourhood is a walk into the past that still clings to her in her refusal to throw the paper with the name of Allah into the trash can because the mother’s insistent voice told her so, in the smells of Biryani and mangoes that cling to her against the “odourless, grey landscape” [62] of London, and of her present.

Like London at that point of the day when it is neither night nor day she also does not want to compartmentalize her life and announce her nationality or her cultural identity loudly. She wants to stick to her roots and also subsist on her new identity, “Why can’t I be both” [60] she even says that she would refuse to choose one over the other. This is something that most of her compatriots would never understand because they confirm to their racial identities, national selves and unabashedly proclaim that. Even her British husband, Jack, who is more tolerant than others towards South Asian and appreciates Iranian cinema, Rushdie and Naipaul is quite confused about her. He cannot understand why she is still fascinated by the royal family and such colonial signposts of the past, or the manner in which her roots re-live in her, “Jack doesn’t understand why I don’t want to live in my country but bring back all kinds of smells and tastes to recreate the memories I have left behind.” [65]. She confesses that she is not obsessed with questions of identity or preoccupied with the idea of seeking the self. She feels free like a bird that flies anywhere and builds a home and is not rooted to a place and so she has found a home in London and her living is not consumed by the compulsive desire to profess her identity or fight to establish her space. Her home is as much London as it is Pakistan. She is happy to be in London, her home, where the sun and the moon can co-exist and shine together, where it is neither day nor day.

Thus all the three stories are engaged with the lives of the ordinary people and their ordinary tales of love, sorrow, misery and wants. Their small acts of courage and bravery add to the charm of the story and makes reading them worthwhile.

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