



My God Is A Woman by Noor Zaheer: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract— *The present paper explores the thematic concerns of the novel My God Is A Woman (2008) authored by the Indian writer and journalist Noor Zaheer. The plot of the novel is spread through almost four decades covering the life of a Muslim women, Safia Abbas Jafri. The novel opens with Safia's marriage to Abbas Jafri, who transforms the young impressionable lady into a fierce and independent woman who could make her own decisions. The novel brilliantly explores several issue pertaining to the rights of Muslim women and compares it with the scriptural recommendations provided in the Qur'an. The author, Noor Zaheer, employs the voice of the narrator to expose the evils that plague orthodox Muslim families. It also focuses on the various regional practices that are condoned in the name of religion without actually being related to Islam.*

Keywords— *Muslim Women's Rights, My God Is A Woman, Noor Zaheer, Women's Rights.*

I. INTRODUCTION

My God Is A Woman tells the story of a Muslim woman, Safia Abbas Jafri, who is married to a London returned barrister Abbas Jafri. Abbas, a freedom fighter, is a member of the Marxist party and vows to work for the betterment of the marginalized sections of the society. Although Safia grew up in a conservative Muslim household, Abbas ensures that she receives higher education and carves her niche in the society. Abbas believes in gender equality and motivates Safia to be independent in all aspects of her life. Since Abbas was fighting against the British and also the hegemonic powers of the Indian society, he was apprehensive of his life he wanted to ensure that Safia could survive without him. Both Abbas and Safia dream of a liberal and free India which gives equal status to all its citizen, including Muslim women. They strongly believe that the nation could truly develop only when it provided equal opportunities to all its citizen irrespective of religion, caste, class or gender. The couple relentlessly works to improve the condition of women, especially Muslim women. In his efforts to reform Muslim Personal Law, Abbas writes a book entitled *The Flame* that questions the regressive rules followed by the Muslims of the country.

However, the clergy issue a fatwa against him citing blasphemy; his communist party refuses to support him and he eventually gets killed by the angry mob. The Qur'an emphatically states, "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable" (The Holy Quran 2:228). The novel clarifies that the rights provided to Muslim women by the Qur'an have not been translated into reality. It is easily discernible that Islamic rules related to women are selectively chosen as per the convenience of those who are in power.

II. THEMATIC CONCERNS

Safia's marriage with Abbas explains the conservative attitude towards marriage within orthodox Muslim households. In Islam, women marriage is considered a civil contract and both parties are free to enter into the contract, or refuse to do so. Safia, as a young woman, had no voice in the decision regarding her marriage. Although the Qur'an allows Muslim women to accept or reject a marriage proposal, the novel clarifies that such rights are limited to scriptures only. Also, woman's right to *mehr* (a gift or contribution given by the husband to the wife) is manipulated by the couple's families to suit their personal interests. Since Abbas Jafri, the prospective groom was a

notorious author who was renounced by the community due to his iconoclastic beliefs that he had expressed in his book, *The Flame*, Safia's father, Syed Mehdi, insists that his family pay fifty thousand asharfis as mehr to ensure that Abbas does not divorce his daughter in future. The reason being that a husband cannot ask his wife to return the mehr that he gave, if he decides to divorce her and it is the sole property of the bride. However, Lady Zeenat Jafri, Abbas's mother, a clever woman, quickly manipulates the situation to her benefit and says that "since you have expressed a doubt, it is only honourable that we set your apprehensions to rest. Your proposal for the meher is accepted and will be formally agreed upon at the time of nikaah and to be paid at the time of talaq" (Zaheer 3). Thus, the mehr, which acts as a financial security for a wife and which must be paid at the time nikah was never paid to Safia because of the previously mentioned condition. Safia's mehr remained an empty promise and could not benefit her in any manner whatsoever. Zaheer uses the opportunity to highlight several issues related to Muslim women's marriage.

In Islamic marriage system, it is mandatory to get the consent of the bride without any coercion or threat, in front of two witnesses. Although Muslim women have the right to accept or reject a marriage proposal, Zaheer emphasises the repercussions associated with a rejection at the time of *nikah* (wedding ceremony). The tale of Nigar and Zain give us a glimpse of the rights provided to Muslim women by Islam. Both of them love each other but Zain's father decides to take Nigar as her fourth wife instead of her daughter-in-law. Disheartened, the couple approaches Abbas and Safia who coax Nigar to reject the proposal at the time of her nikah, and she acts according to their instructions. Eventually, she gets married to Zain. Even though, Nigar abides by their advice, she finds herself in a deeply problematic situation because her parents disown her at once. The gathering admonishes her for her audacity, even the cleric asks her to rethink her decision: "Perhaps the womenfolk of the family should persuade her" (Zaheer 62). However, Abbas was quick to respond to the situation and reminds the gathering that "No persuasion, threat or blackmail can be used to make a girl marry against her wishes (62). Abbas's furious rebuttal of the cleric's advice finally silences him.

Safia was fired as a teacher from Mujtaba Sahib's school due to her strong support for her husband and his infamous book, which earned a fatwa. She expresses her concern over Mujtaba Sahib's unwavering commitment to educating Muslim females in order to make them acceptable to educated husbands. However, Safia not only recognises the flaw in the notion but also emphasises that it is unreasonable to assume that an educated woman, a

"reasoning, logical, analysing being shall never see or realize the lack of reason and the contradictions of the *Shariat* (Islamic jurisprudence). She shall never understand that God by himself could never have been so unjust to one half of his believers. That one who treats colour, race, labour, status with equality, would He treat the two sexes so differently?" (Zaheer 120-121). Throughout the entire book. The author has raised issues that call into question men's power over religion. Safia wonders in a state of distress, "Would ever a day come when the Shariat shall be rewritten to give voice to the women? When shall God decide that he no longer wanted to be used by men? When shall any religion have a female Prophet?" (148). In the later years of her life, Safia ponders over the question of faith and religion. She thinks, "How is one to explain that faith is not inherited; that there is a fundamental difference between religion and faith? Faith comes with belief and this belief has to be based on knowledge, with logic to support that knowledge. The ritual-bound link, that one has with one's religion of birth, is very different from the emotional but firm belief that one has in one's faith" (214). *My God Is A Woman's* protagonist, Safia, believes that law and religion are two separate things. Her ideas echo the demands of Islamic feminists for the separation of religion and law. Women suffer severe consequences as a result of the marriage of law and religion. She takes on the role of the author's spokesperson, urging that India should be ruled by the Uniform Civil Code. She believes that Muslim personal law must evolve to meet the changing requirements of society. In support of her argument, Safia says,

According to Islam, all thieves should have their hands cut, all rapists lose their noses and you should be paying one-third of your income as taxes. No Muslim thief or rapist is punished that way and Muslims are quite happy to divide their income into various allowances so that they do not have to pay any zakaat. Why then should the personal law remain static? (238)

The novel exposes the corruption prevalent in the Muslim clergy, including the Shahi Imam of Lucknow, Maulvis, and Mullahs. The novel showcases that the clerical system works at the behest of the wealthy at all times. Lady Zeenat Jafri effortlessly manages to get fatwas issued in exchange of money. However, the novel seems to project a certain viewpoint onto its characters. Most often, the novel seems to be biased against men in general, wherein Abbas is the only likeable man. Abbas takes it upon himself to inspire Safia to value her individuality and acts as her strength in her personal and professional development. Zaheer emphasises the various ways in which women are compelled hold a subjugated position in society. In response to the unfortunate demise of his

daughter, Mujtaba Sahib, opens a school for girls, however, his aim is to transform young women in compatible wives, which is problematic. Abbas' father, Sir Safdar Ali Jafri, spends time with women hold adulterous relationship with multiple women. His wife, Lady Zeenat is aware of his actions but allows does not react as long as he keeps his sexual rendezvous away from his residence and family. Eventually, he falls in love with Sylvia and they conceive a child. Sir Jafri, a deviant in all aspects related to religion shields himself by invoking the Qur'an regarding permits polygamy and decides to marry Sylvia. Lady Zeenat Jafri was humiliated by her husband's plans to marry another woman. When she expressed her dissatisfaction with Sir Jafri's proposed marriage to Sylvia, he responded flatly, "I love a woman. I want to marry her. She is with my child. I do not want it to be a bastard. What is the far and near of these facts? The Shariat allows me four" (106). Although Sir Jafri was right in his place since Lady Zeenat Jafri could not provide him with the much-needed affection and companionship he craved, his reliance on religion only when he needed a shield demonstrates the selective application of religious injunctions, especially without regard for their requirements, which is unfortunately the general trend among a large section of Muslims. This is a typical occurrence among the novel's wealthy characters. The author points out that men manipulate religious injunctions to suit their personal interests, whenever convenient. Men selectively follow the Quran to defend their actions, but do not adhere to the same text's restrictions. Wasim, the pseudo-fundamentalist husband of Sitara, the daughter of Safia and Abbas, claims to be a pukka Muslim but beats up on his wife and engages in serious criminal activities, which are forbidden in Islam.

The novel seeks to prove that Hindu women have a higher social position than Muslim women because of the constitutional and legal protections they have. The Constitution guarantees these rights to women of all faiths and sects, but the Muslim Personal Law makes it difficult to exercise them. Zaheer demonstrates through the tale of Amrita and Govind Ram that a Hindu woman may fight for her rights in a way that Muslim women cannot. In light of the Quran, this question can be debated. The novel takes up The Shah Bano Case to discuss the issue of divorce and maintenance of wife and children after divorce. Shah Bano, a 62 years old woman, filed a case in court to demand maintenance from her husband. Mohammad Ahmad Khan, her husband contested the case on the ground that Muslim Personal Law does not require a husband to pay maintenance to his divorced wife. Shah Bano won the case, not only in the High Court, but also in the apex court of India, the Supreme Court. However, the

decision enraged the fundamentalist men of the Muslim community and the incumbent Rajiv Gandhi government passed a legislation Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce Act), 1986, that overturned the verdict.

Women are inherently hostile to one another. Abbas' mother, Begum Zeenat, is opposed to Safia. When she rapes Ladli and impregnates her, she protects her eldest son by buying female slaves. She even goes so far as to assassinate Sylvia and Ladli. She makes certain that the priest is always at her side and available to her. As a result, she never asks them questions.

In Noor Zaheer's novel *My God Is A Woman*, Abbas's *bade bhaiya* Syed Wali Jafri engages in sexual promiscuity without regard for the family or community. His affluent and privileged background gives him the freedom to follow his whims and inclinations. He was well-known for spending a lot of money on prostitutes. His mother, on the other hand, instead of disapproving or protesting against him, aided his licentious behaviour by procuring bondage females for him. Ladli, one of the girls, had the audacity to say that the Wali Jafri had been sexually abusing her and that she was pregnant with his kid. She insisted that her child must not be referred to as a bastard. Ladli, however, chose money over Abbas' desire to provide her with a dignified life by providing her a chance to marry Sayed Wali Jafri. Due to her stubborn temperament, Ladli meets an unfortunate demise. She had no idea she was attempting to defy the existing status quo. The gloomy image of how upper-class men exploit every rule, every scenario to their benefit paints a depressing picture of how the entire event was led into honouring Wali Jafri by constructing a bogus tale in which Ladli herself participated.

III. CONCLUSION

We see that the novel raises various issues related to Muslim women and the orthodox ideas prevalent in the community. Although, the novels plot expands through several decades, the readers cannot find radical changes in terms of Muslim women's predicament. As an author, Noor Zaheer gives in-depth and personal observations about the topics throughout the novel, and frequently engages in lengthy arguments to support her position. Her views on women's rights, God, and the Shariat, among other things, can be found in her the novel in the form of narrator's comments. This, often leads the novel into a prosaic commentary on social issues and the fictional aspect of the novel gets lost into these lengthy arguments.

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