

## Politics of Gender in Shahid Nadeem's Selected Plays

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### Abstract:

*Women are expected to conform to myths and social expectations such as not answering back to husbands, not disobeying them, not complaining about them. Shahid Nadeem, in his plays, not only unfolds the cruelty of male chauvinistic society but also demonstrates the role and status of Pakistani women through vast range of characters. His characters are so genuine that they depict the realistic picture of society and highlight its repulsive and outrageous issues which put black mark on Pakistani society. The researcher, taking the three related concerns, patriarchy, role and status of women and construction and deconstruction of myths, argues about the degradation of women and degradation of nature in contemporary society. She argues, in the light of Nadeem's plays, that there is only one path to liberation of women from the false traditional myths which is reconstruction or deconstruction of these myths. The researcher has made moral judgments about women comparing men of loose moral character retrieving from Shahid Nadeem's selected plays.*

**Key words:** Chauvinistic Society, Pakistani Society, Women Role & Status, Myths, Construction & Deconstruction of Myths

## INTRODUCTION

Shahid Nadeem, The executive director of Ajoka Theatre and Ajoka Productions is regarded as the pioneer of political theatre in the Subcontinent. Shahid Nadeem started his career as a human rights and social activist. He gives support to radical modern theatre involved in the struggle to restore many imbalances that continue to exist in unfair systems of different societies. Aromatically and distinguishably he portrays Pakistani society. In his plays, he questions various fundamental assumptions of Pakistani society. He represents the current situation of Pakistani society and explores the possibilities of change. In Shahid Nadeem's plays, different social issues like caste, social class, sect and religion are highlighted. These issues form the thematic core of his dramatic works as he tries to disturb the status quo surrounding them.

According to Horton and Lesile, social problem is often defined as a condition which many people consider undesirable and wish to correct (Horton and Lesile, 1981, p.p 4-6). Social problems are part of the price of social change. Social change disrupts the constant equilibrium of the society, but before long a new equilibrium is regained. Shahid Nadeem's plays express the same thing in Pakistani perspective. Shahid shows in his plays how certain taboos cause all these social problems (sect and religion problems and problems of politics of gender etc.) and block the ways of social change. The use of theatre for the purpose of political subversion is not exclusive to Shahid as the 20<sup>th</sup> century drama across the world has tended to be more and more political.

Indian plays have rendered the role of dramatic author largely equal to theorists and critics. By proceeding theoretical arguments about form, language, style, purpose and influence in a range of symbolic variety, they have proposed antithetical theories of dramatic arrangement and its functions in the modern period in India, and originated competing conceptions of the role of theatre in culture and social life.

Girish Karnad is an Indian playwright who used his plays to present social and cultural issues of Indian society. His plays are full of humour, clever views on politics, and more interesting thing is that he uses folktales in his plays. These folktales unfurl noticeably in his plays like in a play, Naga Mandala. In Naga Mandala, Girish captured social issues specially women issues in Indian society in a very dramatic way. In his play Nanga Mandala, he represents how in Indian society, a woman has no liberty to express her will. Rani, the female protagonist of Nanga Mandala experiences a repressive social system. Rani's husband Appanna, gives no importance to his wife. He always misbehaves with her, speaks in a very annoyed mode, and just gives orders to his wife. In Act One, he states to his wife "Look, I don't like idle chatter DO as you are told, you understand?" (Karnad 254).

There are number of playwrights who pampered their wish to focus on social and cultural issues in their plays. Caryl Churchill, a very famous English dramatist, used feminist themes in her plays. She wrote many plays like *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, *Serious Money* etc. which deals with that how women's losing their loyalty to attain power in male dominant environment. Similarly, 'Vinegar Tom' play also draws society's refusal of people who don't be traditional to the mainstream, or who are different. For example, in the play, there is a character 'Belley' is considered as she is mad because she does not want to marry. Play illustrates how much control men have in society and women have been treated as submissive to men. In one way, Play reflects gender and sexual discrimination present in

society. How to confront the 'status quo' of gender oppression remains a continuing question for Churchill.

There is a large body of modern plays that undermines the apparent consensus on matters of cultural and social existence. Writers like Caryl Churchill, Hanif Kuereshi and Bertolt Brecht have given a completely new meaning to gender and taboos associated with it. Contemporary drama has time and again shown the subversive power of theatre by ripping open the myths that exist. Shahid Nadeem's plays express the same subversive spirit in Pakistani perspective. His work has initiated serious critical debate.

In Pakistani society, the role and status of men and women are clearly demarcated. As in any typical patriarchal society, men are supposed to be strong, authoritative and dictatorial. Especially all rich men are considered to be more pious and virtuous. While women in this patriarchal society are treated as subordinate to men. In a patriarchal society, what men do is usually valued more highly than what women do because men do it, even their activities are very similar or the same. In different areas of Southern India, for example, harvesting rice is men's work, shared work or women's work: "wherever a task done by women it is considered easy, and where it is done by[men] it is considered difficult" (Mencher 1988,104). The devaluation of women and social domination of men has social history. It is produced and maintained by identifiable social processes and built into the general social structures and individual identities deliberately and purposefully. Shahid draws on Pakistani society for his raw material which is a patriarchal society like Ghanian and Indian societies.

Shahid's plays show a variety of major social issues particularly related to the status of women and trafficking of women in a patriarchal society. By exploring the present role and status of women in Pakistani society, Shahid shows that myths regarding gender stereotypes need to be analyzed for

bringing social change. The research is divided in to four chapters.

First chapter will explain the gender disparity in Pakistani chauvinistic society in Shahid Nadeem's plays. Second chapter will show the existing gender role and status definition in Shahid's plays and gender inequality in Pakistani society. Third chapter will elaborate the definition of myth according to Barthes' idea of mythologies. How myths are created? And how these myths acquire the status of certainty? Barthes' view is that myths are linguistic constructs which have no meaning, but when arbitrarily meanings given to them, they become meaningful. In the last chapter of the dissertation, subversion of myths regarding gender stereotypes will be discussed. How gender related myths can be deconstructed by using counter cultural theories and feminist criticism.

This research will have implications for the existing research trends in Pakistan. Much of the recent research in the field of gender studies and woman studies has initiated discourses concerning the role of woman in Pakistan. It will attempt to identify the modes and means in which gender status and role is stereotyped in Shahid Nadeem's selected plays. The research will show that gender related myths found in textual material can be de-constructed and subjected to subversion.

The study is delimited to the analysis of politics of gender in Shahid Nadeem's selected plays, The Acquittal, Woman of Sorrow, Black is my Robe and Third Knock. The text will be analyzed by using theories related to counter-culture and modern feminist criticism. The text will also be analyzed by using the idea of mythologies by Roland Barthes. After content analysis, findings will be discussed for conclusion.

## **GENDER DISPARITY IN MALE CHAUVINISTIC SOCIETY**

Indo-Pak region is one of the patriarchal constituencies of the world where male members of the society are considered the supreme authority. A patriarchal society consists of a male dominated power structure. Men in patriarchal society are the decision-makers and hold positions of power and prestige. Everything is organized and run by men. In patriarchal society, the role of men and women are clearly demarcated, typically the attitude of men is considered to be dominant. Other trends in male behavior, include strength of will, dominance, forcing others to back down, not needing to explain themselves, assuming superiority over others (race, sex, outlook).

Moreover, in male chauvinistic society, people prefer to have sons instead of daughters in marital childbearing process as necessary survival strategy for the maintenance of lineage, property and the continuation of the (male-headed) family household. Implicit within this, of course, is the understanding that girls and women do not offer the same qualities or social positioning that men do in securing these goals. In clearly male dominated and rigidly sex stratified societies, the women's role is powerless, reserved, and subservient. While describing female power, autonomy and demographic change in the third world in a book, Women's Roles and Population Trends in the Third World edited by Richard Aner, Mayra Buvinic and Nadia H. Youssef, female role and status is defined as,

In those developing societies which are rigidly sex stratified and patriarchal and patrilineal, a secure basis for women's power is derived from their ability to have children, especially sons. In fact, reproduction is the only power bases that women in all social classes and marital relationships can more or less control. Hence, they have no motivation to limit the number of children they bear until they have at least two or three sons to consolidate their position in the household (Caldwell, 1976; Okonjo, 1978a) (p 119-120).

In Shahid's play, Black is My Robe, Sundri is a character who acts like a dependent and obedient wife.

Gender relations and roles in Pakistan are assigned to and used differently by men and women. For their fortification and decorum, women are expected to live under the constraints of purdah, most obvious in veiling. By separating women from the activities of men, both physically and symbolically, purdah creates difference between men and women spheres. Most women spend most of their lives within their homes and go out only for solemn and approved reasons. Outside the home, social life generally revolves around the activities of men.

The role of woman is quite general in patriarchal society like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and South Africa etc. In a book, Muslim Women in India, Political & Private Realities: 1890-1980s by Shahida Lateef, It is mentioned that purdah is an extreme form of sex role differentiation. She encodes Papanek's views about wearing purdah,

“Family structures, bolstered by socio-religious customs, help to maintain hierarchy and authority within the family. For all women, Hindu or Muslim, seclusion was a method of exercising this control. And the ability of a family to keep its women in purdah is directly related to its socio-economic status, i.e., where the family is not dependent on the woman's earning capacity. Status of families and communities is, therefore, linked to their ability to protect their women through purdah (p 133-134).

As far as the empowerment of women is concerned, in some cases, women possess power or they think themselves powerful when they give birth to a male child, or the amount of articles she brings with her in her dowry.

As in Nadeem's Black is my Robe, Wassaya always supports Sohni when both his wives Sohni and Sundri fight. Because she brought an ox in her dowry and the other factor is, Sundri is unable to bear a son. There are different factors which impact women's status in the family and community, such as,

age, experiences, giving birth to a male child, that change women's status in the family to more power wielding positions.

## **ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN SHAHID NADEEM'S PLAYS**

Nadeem's plays show different female roles of Pakistani society. These characters prove that because of patriarchal traditions, social norms and stereotypes, women in Pakistan face greater challenges in living their lives. In advanced civilisation, women and men work equally in building a balanced society. But in patriarchal society, the deep rooted discriminatory socio-cultural traditions are embedded.

In Shahid Nadeem's play The Acquittal, Jamila, a young aggressive girl, married to an old man, raises her voice to speak against unjust and brutal social orders present in Pakistani society. Without knowing her wish, her father fixed her marriage with old Fazal Din. In scene 6 she says:

I wasn't even fourteen when my parents arranged my marriage with Fazal Din. He must have been just a few years younger than my father. When I first saw him on the day of my wedding I just burst out crying and didn't stop crying until I left my parent's house. Everyone said the poor girl wept so much because she was leaving her home (p 68).

Women after their marriages even have no liberty and power. Before marriage, they are bound to obey their parents and brothers and after marriages they follow their husband's orders and live subserviently. In scene 8, Jamila says very angrily that:

No man can understand what we women have to suffer, what we have to take from men from the time we are born to the time we die. (Angrily) If I had an axe, I would slaughter them one by one. (Her actions indicate murderous intent) I would first strike at the father who never thought I was as good as his sons and forced me to marry the old man; then I'd strike at

my brother who cared only for his honour and never for my happiness”,(p 74).

In Nadeem's plays, it is presented that in Pakistani society, women are treated as chattel, 'given' or 'acquired' through arranged marriages, to spend their lives in the service of a male dominated social system. The wide range of characters presented in Nadeem's dramas, are traditional hierarchies based on class position, and gender role.

His play, Black is My Robe, is a story of a villager who gets second marriage for the sake of an Ox as a dowry. When his Ox died, he exchanged his spare wife for an Ox. This story of Shahid's play shows that in Pakistani society, women are given the same status as animal. Sundri's husband has just married to another woman for getting an Ox in dowry. After getting married to Sohni, Wasaya gives no importance to his first wife Sundri. He always scolds her and when his both wives start fighting with each other; Wasaya always gives favor to Sohni because Sohni makes Wasaya wealthy by bringing Ox in her dowry. He always jeers at Sundri, like he says, Wasaya: Sundri, it is very bad. Don't break her heart (p 164).

As a suppressed character, Sundri has no right to take any decision, to speak against her husband's second wife. At one place, she says:

“And what about my heart? Haven't you broken it into pieces? You are disgusting. Even poor Ditta is better than you. Look how he is mourning his dead wife? But you are trying to kill your living wife” (p 164).

Sundri is his barren wife that is why she couldn't stop her husband from second marriage. Even she has no permission to express her feelings and love for her husband. In scene6, she says:

Food! Ask your beloved wife to feed you. Forget the bread cooked by me. I have served you enough. I have massaged you

all night, fed you with my hands. And what did I get in return? You brought in another woman to me (p 167).

Wasaya doesn't bother her feelings whatever she says and just order her in aggressive mood, "Shut up and give me food" (p 167).

Soon after, Sohni's Ox dies and Wasaya's business collapses leaving him in utter despondency and the maasi, who arranges marriages in the village, gives him an idea to exchange his wife with Ditta's Ox. When Sundri comes to know that she is going to be exchanged with an Ox that she is the price or alternate of an Ox, she avows:

May God's curse be upon all of you. You are so unashamed. Are not we women human? Don't we have any right? You are exchanging me with an Ox. You don't have any moral. You first humiliated me by bringing a second wife and forced me to serve her Ox. Now you are selling me to that crazy man, just to get his ox. May God destroy you. May He punish you severely (p 169).

This is how women are treated as commodity leaving them with no choice and option other than bewailing. Such cases are typical in heavily populated and feudal provinces of Pakistan, particularly in Sindh and Punjab. Social norms about family honour are damaged by a woman getting divorced, particularly at her own behest but nothing is damaged if she is bartered with an ox.

Ironically, Nadeem shows in his plays that in Pakistani society, women are mere objects of beauty, meant to produce babies, maintaining their houses and obeying their husband's unfair orders. They are the first to wake up and the last to sleep.

A number of researches highlight some specific forms of violence – physical, mental, emotional and psychological that women experience in Pakistani social context. The violence against women includes, among other manifestation, abusive or

offensive language, sexual harassment, physical abuse, sexual abuse, stripping, mutilation, forced prostitution, rape, incest and murder. It also includes denial and violation of their basic human rights to life, security, liberty and choice in the form of child marriage, forced marriage, denial of the right to marriage by choice, forced confinement and so on. The character of Jamila presented in The Acquittal, faces the same situation when her father forces her to get married to a person who is of his own age.

Similarly, Nadeem highlights the practice of rape, sexual and physical abuse through the character of Maryam in the play The Acquittal, scene IV, when Jamila tells Zahida about the pregnancy of Mariyam:

Zahida (in surprise): Really? Why hasn't she been released as yet then? I'll talk to...

Jamila (interrupting her): Who will have her released? This poor woman has no one. No one knows who she is or where she's from, where she's going, and now the jail administration won't release her.

Zahida: Why?

Jamila (going up to Mariam she lifts her covering from her stomach): Because of this. Unless this is decided, she won't be released.

Zahida (she still doesn't understand): But why?

Jamila: Oh, memsahib, you don't understand anything easily, do you? How can they let her go out of here with this stomach? This is a testimony to their dastardly actions.

Zahida: So...this means that...

Jamila: It means that until the baby is born, she will stay here.

Zahida: Who is the child's father? Which one is the bastard?

Jamila (laugh and addresses Mariam): tell her, girl, who is the father?

Mariam laughs, Jannat stares at her angrily.

Mariam (in an experienced voice): Warder Karam Dad...no, the man from the hospital...no, I think Superintendent Aslam...

Jamila: All the officers of the jail are its fathers...people can't find one father and this fortunate one has no dearth of them. Do you understand Jehda [Zahida] Begum?

The study tries to keep a benchmark of both the formal and substantive concept of equality analyzing Shahid Nadeem's plays.

## **SUPERSTITIONS AND MYTHS**

Myth makes particular signs appear natural, eternal, absolute, or frozen. It thus transforms history into nature. Its function is to freeze or arrest language. Barthes does not believe that myth is necessary. Roland Barthes in his book Mythologies describes that how myths are shaped and reshaped. He states that:

Myth is a type of speech. Of course, it is not any type: language needs special conditions in order to become myth: we shall see them in a minute. But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode signification, a form (p 107).

His social constructivism is also partial. He believes there are things, with specific attributes, separate from their mythical constructions so does Shahid Nadeem. The plays by Shahid Nadeem depict the false and foisted tradition with mythical treatment. At first stage, he highlights these practices and then provides the solutions to eliminate or to mould them towards a new direction.

## **DECONSTRUCTION OF MYTHS**

Myths can be deconstructed the way they are constructed. If Shahid Nadeem highlights the aspects of constructed myths of society in his plays related to gender issues on one hand, and he

also presented different ways to deconstruct or reconstruct on the other. Since the ultimate decisions regarding the fate of those people rest with such false pirs, but somehow Nadeem tries to beware them, sets foundation of new myths or mould them through his vast range of characters. In Black is My Robe when Wasaya exchanged his wife with Ditta's ox and so are the cases with such regions of Male patriarchal societies, especially in Pakistan and India. But as far as the deconstruction of these old myths is concerned, Opra, the stranger, plays a very positive role to lead them to a new direction, to a new beginning. From the opening scene of the play till the end, Opra tries to deconstruct the old misconceptions of people which have eventually become myths. . In scene V, he, conversing with Sundri, asks her to reject the old belief what people have in the false Pir:

Opra: Not the patron but the plunderer. Tell me, have you ever benefited from his blessings? You never got the child in spite of all the blessings.

Sundri: That was my misfortune

Opra: That is the point. If he fails, you blame yourself. If something happens, you credit him.

Nadeem has tried to highlight that things go stray when they are not properly treated. So does Jamila when she was married with a person of her father's age. In scene VIII, Nadeem, through the character of Zahida who is an activist, shows the light of hope and he also escalates the attitude of other agencies like media, politicians, lawyers etc. She states:

Zahida: it is injustice, Jamila, that is why women have to get together and start a movement and they must also get the men to join them. Now look, we have lawyers on our side, politicians, journalists – we are not alone. (p 74)

The concept of Shahid Nadeem is no different from that of Roland Barthes in shaping or reshaping of myths. He, like him, presents the old traditional, customary shaped myths and then presents the signifiers to reshape them. He serves as changer of

shift from traditional to modern, from conventional to exotic and from old to new.

## CONCLUSION

The study has tried to analyse the concept of Shahid Nadeem what he has presented in his plays through vast range of his characters. The researcher has found out from Selected Plays that male members of the society are having almost all the powers in society and they are even considered more virtuous because of the title they own. Pir, in the play Black is my Robe, possesses greater power and respect over others, even though he is a manipulator and a sexual abuser. Male members of the society, from a broader or narrower level, possess more power over women. Wassaya, in the play Black is my Robe, is the only authoritative person at his home. He bartered his wife with an ox because ox was more beneficial than the infertile wife. The researcher has dug up that Pakistani society is a male dominant society by the presentation of male characters from Shahid Nadeem's selected plays.

It is evident that social change is necessary for the development of Pakistani society which cannot be possible with the presence of gender inequality. Shahid Nadeem has also enforced to eliminate gender discrimination by deconstructing the old traditions or false myths related to women's role. The researcher has analysed that the role and status of men and women in Pakistani society is clearly demarcated in Shahid Nadeem's selected plays. Pakistani society has specified stereotyped role for men and women and society only accepts those who act according to the said stereotyped attitude. The researcher has concluded that the myths have no meaning and they are self-generated on the basis of our false beliefs. They can be deconstructed or appropriated the way they are generated. Shahid Nadeem also tries to deconstruct or appropriate those myths which create gender inequality in

society and are big hurdles in the way of development and progress of our country.

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