

## An Exploration of Multiple Subject Positions of Pakistani Women in Afzal Khan's Memoir

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### Abstract

The present research article aims to explore Fawzi Afzal Khan's memoir *Lahore With Love Growing up With Girlfriends Pakistani Style* while integrating theoretical framework presented by Islamic feminist scholars such as Mernissi, Moghissi, Kahf, Khan and Zine. This research is qualitative in nature because it aims to view social reality regarding women as constantly shifting. The findings bring to light the presence of plurality and relativity in Pakistani's women's lives. Fawzia Afzal Khan is a postmodern author who is skeptic of the fixed identities and stereotypical roles of Pakistani women. The findings further reveal that Fawzia Afzal Khan has tried to depict the multiple subject positions of Pakistani women through the lives of her girlfriends. In this way she has presented an alternative herstory of Pakistan.

**Key Words:** feminist, multiplicity, relativity, postmodernism

### 1. Introduction

The present research is focused on Afzal Khan's memoir, *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girl Friends Pakistani Style*. Afzal Khan was born in Pakistan, Lahore. She is a professor of English and Director of Women and Gender Studies Program at Montclair State University. She graduated from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, Pakistan. She has earned her M.A and PhD. in English Literature from Tuft University. Afzal Khan has also been granted the "Excellence in Public Life Award" by the American Muslim Alliance in 2008. She writes in academic journals and newspapers. Her areas of interest are issues related to postcolonial studies, feminism and political Islam. She is also a theater actor of experimental theatre collective *Compagnie Faime de seicle* and a qualified vocalist. She is an unorthodox intellectual and she reflects all her unorthodox ideas in her only memoir. Afzal Khan's only memoir deals with many issues of Pakistan related to politics, religion, rights of minorities and sectarianism. But the memoir seems to be mainly a great contribution to women's rights issues in Pakistan. Afzal Khan's memoir can be called a postmodern subversive feminist memoir. In her memoir, she deals with gender issues' prevailing in the patriarchal hegemonic society of Pakistan. With a very strong interest and involvement in the shared herstories of her *sehalis*, she talks about their place in Pakistani gendered-based class structure. But some of her *sehalis* in the memoir resist the limitations of the patriarchal definition of women. She transgresses the domineering patriarchal discourse of Pakistani literature by providing an alternative image of a strong and confident female in the characters of some of her girlfriends.

Afzal Khan's memoir is explicitly divided into five chapters and each chapter is named after a girlfriend except chapter four which is named as "Blood and Girls". "Each chapter is devoted to one friend so that the chapters are in equal part homage and eulogy for the loss of friendships" (Subrmanian, 2011, p.6). The memoir is designed by its very structure to present the 'self' as relational so Afzal Khan's herstory is less a narrative about the self than a biography about others. Opening of the book is disclaimer. Ending of the memoir is epilogue. Here, we have footnotes and appendices which are a part of non-fictional writing. That is why Afzal Khan herself has

acknowledged that in her memoir she has blurred the boundary between fact and fiction as it is often a case in memoirs.

The present study will reveal how there is no monolithic subject position of Pakistani women. Gender is not the only factor to construct the subject position of Pakistani women rather factors such as religion, class position, locality, nationality and financial positions play a significant role in the construction of subject positions while making it multiple and temporary.

The reading of such postmodern memoirs as that of Afzal Khan's *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girl Friends Pakistani Style* offers insights into alternative representations of Pakistani Muslim women. The text of the memoir highlights the idea that religious identity of Pakistani Muslim Women keep on changing and developing over time. It is not simple and static rather it is full of ups and downs, contradictions and tensions. So the subject position of Muslim women cannot be split into monolithic identity rather it is complex, multiple and relative.

As Spivak (1993) argues that, "There are many subject positions that one must inhabit; one is not just one thing". Afzal Khan called Pakistan a place of paradox. As she said; "I was born in this place of paradox. This is a place where women are oppressed and where they resist without the shame for the sun" (Khan, 2011, p.xix).

## 2. Research Methodology

Research is a systematic and defined process to explore truth and no research is possible without following a research methodology. Research methodology is a systematic way to describe how research has been conducted. To investigate that how Fawzia Afzal Khan's memoir shattered the stereotypical roles and fixed subject positions associated with Pakistani Muslim in the form of alternative representations, the present research integrates Islamic feminist scholars such as Mohanty, Moghissi, Mernissi, Khan, Kahf, Zine. Moreover, the researcher has also picked out different incidents from the memoir to reveal the Pakistani women's world and also examined some of Afzal Khan's girlfriends' lives thoroughly to reveal the multiple subject positions of Pakistani women. So the researcher's choice of Afzal Khan's memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girlfriends Pakistani Style* seems to be appropriate as it fulfills the research purpose through presenting an alternative herstory of Pakistan both in form and content of the memoir. This invariably leads one to infer that this research is predominantly qualitative in nature because qualitative research encapsulates a view of social reality as constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation which will be the focus of this research.

### Research Question

The overarching question of the present research is;

3. How does the memoir unearth the multiple subject positions of Pakistani Muslim women?

### Research Objectives

There are two main objectives of this research

1. To analyse how Fawzia Afzal Khan's Memoir challenges the fixed identities of Pakistani Muslim in the form multiple subject positions.
2. To develop the theoretical understanding of the memoir while incorporating Islamic feminist scholars.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

As stated earlier in section 2 that present research relied upon theoretical framework presented by Islamic feminist scholars. There is a brief introduction of these Islamic feminist scholars.

## Islamic Feminist Scholars and Fluid Identities of Muslim Women

Mohanty (1991) asserted that the western scholars represent Eastern women particularly Muslim women as having singular and monolithic subject position. The symbols of sex and polygamy have often been associated with Islam. So the identity of Muslim women has been stigmatized by western scholars. Islamic feminists have challenged the representations of Muslim women by western scholars. They have asserted in their indigenous works that the identity of Muslim women is not fixed as shown by western writers and western feminists; rather it is temporary and fluid. Islamic feminists asserted that there are multiple identities of Muslim women which depend on their historical, cultural, geographical, religious and local backgrounds. Therefore, various religious and cultural symbols and identities related to Muslim women continue in acquiring new meanings and new connotations (Moghissi, 1999). The Western scholars, for example, often associate the signifier of veil with the oppression and suppression. But it does not inevitably connote suppression. On the contrary, Moghissi (1999) asserts that covering the face could be a means to show social and political areas of empowerment in Muslim societies. For example, The Iranian Muslim women choose to cover their faces to clarify political amalgamation with their sisters. She further asserts that Islam has always been the target of demonization for maltreating the women. The fact is that teachings of Holy Quran and sayings of Holy Prophet have nothing to do with suppression of women.

Mersini (1991) theorize that many times there has been wrong interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence in Islamic societies in order to regulate the patriarchal constructed hierarchy of power. Mernissi (1991) further indicates that Islamic fundamentalist show strong misogynistic inclination just only to achieve monetary gains and political interests. Fundamentalists exploit sacred text and the teachings of Islam for countering the threats posed by unveiled women, restricting their mobility and contact with the outer world.

Khan (1994) points out Islamic feminists have criticized the patriarchal institutions for forcibly imposing certain laws or revelations which have nothing to do with Holy Quran and Hadith. Accordingly, imposition of prejudicial laws on Muslim women without taking into account their relevance in particular context resulted in stigmatization of Islam. Female creative writers belonging to postcolonial countries in particular are trying to explore in their indigenous works that how scriptures and teachings of Holy Quran are manipulated to gain monetary gains and political interests. The reaction of female protagonists to such gendering has also been the focus of these female creative writers.

Kahf (1999) has also criticized the ways of Western literature to represent Muslim women as “a maid to be rescued”. The Muslim woman in Western literatures has become an object of Western male gaze. Such type of representation of Muslim women is governed by power politics. Later western Feminists have also contributed to the project of colonizer, by propagating similar motivated representations of Muslim women as submissive, oppressed and conservative.

Zine (2008) argues that the postcolonial writers and particularly postcolonial female creative writers have a tendency to use certain motifs and tropes in their creative works in order to contest the Westernized representation of Muslim women. The new meanings are given to these motifs according to the situations.

### 4. An Analysis of Multiple Subject Positions of Pakistani Women in the Memoir

Afzal Khan’s memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girl Friend Pakistani Style* also contests the poststructuralist notion of subjectivity as temporary and shifting in the context of patriarchal

society of postcolonial Pakistan. Like black postcolonial feminist theorist Mohanty (1991) Afzal Khan challenges the white feminist's notion of monolithic singular subjectivity of women of colour as gendered subaltern in the third world countries such as postcolonial Pakistan. She unveils through the narration of herstory of Pakistan that not only gender but the variables of race, nationality, class, religion, sect, place and financial position play a very significant role in the construction of multiple subject positions of Pakistani women.

Suleri (1992) argues:

[The] claim to authenticity — only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial sub continental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture — points to the great difficulty posited by the 'authenticity' of female racial voices in the great game which claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want (Suleri, 1992, p.760).

So the stereotypical representation of Muslim female subjectivity has been shattered by Afzal Khan to indicate that the subject position is a relative term.

### **Class as a Variable in the Construction of Female Subjectivity in Pakistan**

Mohanty (1991) has criticized the western white feminist's act of portraying the third world women as gendered subaltern and she has considered the class an important variable in the construction of female subjectivity in the third world countries like Pakistan. Afzal Khan has also taken the same stance and depicted in herstory of Pakistan that how class position of females in society plays a very significant role in the construction of their subjectivity.

For example, in the characters of her girlfriend Hajira and her mother this includes Afzal Khan herself, she has revealed that these women cannot be split into the stereotypical images of Muslim women who are often portrayed as submissive, conservative, oppressed, uneducated and un-western in their thinking and attire. We are told about Hajira's mother that Hajira's on the occasion of Hajira's marriage with Sufi her mother wears a "sleeveless blouse with her sari" (Khan, 2011, p.53). On the other hand, Sufi's mother who belongs to lower class is "draped in a full sleeved shalwar kameez, a large chader like dupatta covering her head and ample bosom" (Khan, 2011, p.53). So most of the times, the Muslim women of lower middle class prefer strictly to wear Islamic attire. They people are allowed to get western education and they can enjoy listening western music. In a clear contrast to Fawzia's parents who are philistines Hajji's mother talks about Eliot, Lawrence and Picasso. It is also Hajira who introduces western classical singers such as Leonard Con, Janice Ian, Crosby, Stills, Nash, Simon and Garfunkel to Fawzia. Haji's family keep on organizing picnics and outings and her boy cousins are also allowed to join them in such occasions. But it can be argued that such type of liberties and enjoyments are only the parts of the lives of privileged class of Pakistan. The people who belong to lower classes usually do not enjoy such liberties in Pakistan. So class intersects in constructing the subject position of Pakistani Muslim women.

Moreover, suicide is also a kind of agency employed by Hajira to contest and destabilize the male hegemony and fake communism of her lower middle husband. Her character is depicted by Afzal Khan as postcolonial female subject whose subjectivity is temporary and shifting. The portrayal of her character reveals her both as interpellated subject and as a subject with personal agency. The narrative of the first two chapters of the memoir i.e. Sam's secret and Hajira reveals that sexism and murderous disregard for women is exclusively the domain of lower class people. The women of upper class families are not facing such misogyny and heinous practices.

### **Khan's Multiple Subject Positions**



Afzal Khan's strategic use of her own multiple subject positions in single lexical items as *actorsingerpoetactivistmemoirists* is her transgressive way of subverting the singular monolithic subject position of women of colour. She occupied these multiple subject positions also to contest the male hegemonies. Afzal Khan's fissure of selfhood fractured into so many roles manifest the ever changing multiplicity of subject positions.

### **Financial Position in the Construction of Female Subjectivity**

I was born in this place of paradox. This is a place where women are oppressed and they resist without shame for the sun. Where women are totting the hijab, and others are dancing away almost naked at the most elite of clubs and homes (Khan, 2011, p.xix)

In the portrayal of the character of Madina she has manifested that how she resisted the patriarchal oppression without shame for the sun. "She never fears man" (Khan, 2011, p.103) women like Madina and her Marxist mother question the interpretation of their identities by the male hegemonic community and state interest; they perform the acts of resistance that destabilizes dominant order.

### **Religion as Variable in the Construction of Female Subject Position**

Religion is described by French Marxist philosopher Althusser (1971) as one of the ideological state apparatus to interpellate the human as the subject of ideology. In the same way religion play a very significant role in the construction of female subject positions. Khan (1994) points out that Islamic feminist have criticized the patriarchal institutions for forcibly imposing certain laws or revelations which have nothing to do with Holy Quran and Hadith. Accordingly, imposition of prejudicial laws on Muslim women without taking into account their relevance in particular context resulted in stigmatization of Islam. Female creative writers belonging to postcolonial countries in particular are trying to explore in their indigenous works that how scriptures and teachings of Holy Quran are manipulated to gain monetary gains and political interests. The reaction of female protagonists to such gendering has also been the focus of these female creative writers.

Afzal Khan has clearly revealed in herstory of Pakistan that how religious ideology is manipulated in extremist Islamist state of Pakistan to manipulate and oppress the Muslim women.

Afzal Khan unveils in herstory of Pakistan through the lives of her girlfriends the paradoxical position of Islam as a religion with regard to the subject positions of Pakistani women.

Afzal Khan also laments over the loss of some of her girlfriends' selfhood and their gradual conversion into religious fanatics. She mused that "best friends have become religious zealots in a way I could not have anticipated when we were giggly girls together" (Khan, 2011, p.65). Afzal Khan encounter with her friend Naumana reveals how her girlfriends have been hegemonized by the patriarchal society through the male interpretation of teachings of Holy Quran. This is what argued by Mernissi (1991) that there had been a strong misogynistic tendency among Islamic fundamentalists, which is actually governed by political gains of the patriarchal societies. Naumana's ex-husband takes his child from her after she has cared her child for seven years without taking any penny from her husband.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that there is not a singular monolithic subject position of Pakistani women. Gender is not the only factor to construct the subject position of Pakistani women rather factors such as religion, class position, locality, nationality and financial positions play a very significant role in the construction of subject positions of Pakistani women while making it multiple, flexible, relative and temporary.

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