



## AN ODYSSEY DE ADEPTE TO AFFECTEE: EASTERNISM IN QAISRA SHAHRAZ'S THE HOLY WOMAN.

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**Abstract** :This article aims at exploring how Qaisra Shahraz's heroine, Zarri Bano, standing at the cross-roads of the forces of obscurantism, operating in the name of religion and globalization, negotiates her way. 'The Holy Woman'(2001) by Qaisra, depicts various aspects of Pakistani rural society such as conservative and realist, the old and the new, the patriarch and the feminist. In ' the Novel' the writer has skillfully delineated the fear from Islam (Islamophobia) of the orientalist, competing the fundamentalist stances, and engrossing the readers in debating a necessary change for gender equation. The purpose of the study is to pinpoint the laborious and industrious life of Pakistani women under a patriarchy. The research is qualitative in nature that analyses the protagonist's sufferings and compulsions. The study is significant in the sense that it brings forth the life of Pakistani rural women in a male dominated society. It is found that the novel, Written about the oppressions in the life of a woman, portrays the story of a young girl who is universityeducated with feminist stances, surrenders herself to a feudal lord, her father, towards the end. The protagonist of the novel is not a mutineer; yet she puts herself in troubles to snatch her identity and find her say in the male dominated society. The protagonist, Zarri Bano exemplifies how females, bridled by traditions, settle their way to self identification by mingling the modern with the traditional.

**Key Words:** Holy Woman, Patriarchy, Easternism, Oppression, Tradition

### I. INTRODUCTION

How women are treated in different cultures of the world and how this sort of treatment is thought to be caused by the dictates of religion? is a universally debated question. In her first novel 'The Holy Woman' (2001), set in the existing Sindh male dominated society, Qaisra Shahraz observes with a feminist lens the traditional victimization of a woman by her own relatives and guardians. Qaisra Shahraz is born in Pakistan and lives in United Kingdom. Her deep analysis as regards the rural areas of Pakistan confirms the fact that she has never been away from Pakistan. Her novels, *The Holy Woman* (2001) and *Typhoon* (2003) portray the life in Sindh, its customs and traditions, its characteristics and physical features and above all its people. She not only depicts the male dominance but also the life of the oppressed. More significantly, she is concerned with the lives of women who are always at daggers drawn with the feudal system having serious and fatal

penalties for them. Both the novels have got their setting in the rural area of Sindh, on one hand notorious for trivializing women and on the other hand putting them in the most important office of the head of the government. There is a comparison between the rural Sindh and the urban Sindh, rather with the outside world. Her setting is superb when she describes the people of the village and their traditions with her mastery of blending the past with the present. The novel presents a complete picture of the life of rural Sindh; it joys, sorrows, merry making, sufferings and mourning of its people. The Holy Woman is not only the story of one Zarri Bano, but it becomes the story of all those unfortunate women who are destined to suffer from the hands of those whom they hold as their dears. The women reconcile themselves to be the sufferers, not because they don't have the power to resist but because the oppressor seems helpless to them and so they want to defend him. Liberating the novel from the cultural boundaries of Pakistanan observing it at a larger perspective, the writer has endeavored to oppose the Orientalists' orations and to contradict the conservative stance towards herpeople.

### Significance of the Research

The study is significantly significant in the sense that it highlights the problems of the women in the rural areas of Pakistan. Whatever the affliction unleashed towards women is to be brought forward for

consideration.

### **Problem Statement**

Women in rural Pakistan are treated badly due patriarchal system. Traditionally, woman is being married to The Holy Quran so that the property of the family may not be transferred to any other family if a woman is married outside the family.

### **Research Objectives**

- \* To know about the various reasons for the suppression of woman in the rural areas of Pakistan.
- \* To explore the status of woman in a male dominated society.

### **Research Questions**

1. Why woman is mal-treated in rural Pakistan?
2. What is the condition of woman in a patriarchal society?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Debating on the features of Qaisra Shahraz's novel, at the time of its publication in Turkey, when people were discussing the clash of civilization, Burak Fazl Cabuk considered them as good sources of information. Edward Said, while demanding Orientalism as a conception of difference between east and west, further pronounced that Orientalism "was an exclusively male province. . . it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders." He further says, "This is especially evident in the writing ...all they are willing". (Said 2007,45-55).

Because of the establishment of such a notion there appeared a powerful philosophy which is liable to globalize the Oxidental norms. Ziauddin Sardar, a Pakistani origin, London- based cultural critic, in his book Orientalism (Sardar 2005: 117) pointing to the problematics of Orientalism, writes; "Orientalism is built out of the constructive imagination ... widest possible sense, it is simply what is known and taken for granted."

The fundamentalists also follow the same point of view. Zine in her article 'Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism' claims, "Muslim women's bodies continue to be disciplined and ... of patriarchal state authorities is an anti-feminist move." Muslim women, Zine cautions, must be attractive to 'the ways their bodies and identities are scripted in service of non-imperialist goals and from within fundamentalist worldviews (Zine 2006:10). Though not belonging to any of the countries Zine argues, women in Pakistan, since centuries, 'continue to be disciplined and regulated' by oppressive traditions in the name of religion, tradition, and expediency of state authority.

As tradition, ideology and culture informed by patriarchal dogmas generate a set of beliefs which influence masculine and feminine identity formations, both men and women in Pakistan have succumbed to these dictates. In Pakistani society, women are highly valorized as mothers and daughters but their bodies are subjugated and identities mutilated by mechanisms of power the moment they deviate from the prescribed norms. "The subaltern treatment towards Muslim women is a burning debate for the postcolonial feminists. Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha: 1990) rightly observes that, the epistemological generalizations sensationalize issues relating nations.

Questioning the validity of the western representation of third-world women', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a leading feminist, postcolonial critic and deconstructionist, by giving a provocative title to essay and the book, 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (1988), opened a new discourse on how the 'other' women are forced into silence or remain without unspoken words. The knowledge produced thus extends the frontiers of hegemonic power more and enriches knowledge less, so argues Spivak. Commenting upon what Spivak refers to as epistemic violence, Stephen Morton says, Spivak has argued "everyday...the technical vocabulary of western critical theory" (Morton 2003: 7). Spivak, however, also wants to record the protest against the world-view based on western knowledge that 'all women's lives and histories are the same' (Morton 2003:90).

Challenging the duality of Orientalism and Fundamentalism, Qaisra Shahraz in her novel *The Holy Woman*, undertakes a journey in which she presents the Muslim culture to the West. As an aboriginal, Shahraz,

like Spivak, feel that literature can provide rhetorical space for subaltern groups to re-articulate the suppressed histories of popular struggle' (Morton 2003: 124).

Thus, in an interview, Shahraz explains that through her novel *The Holy Woman* she tries to dispel 'negative views about Islam and Muslims at large' by introducing 'the vibrant Muslim world, its customs and rituals' by taking them on a journey to four Muslim countries - Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia'. As regards the issue of Muslim women's veiling practices, Shahraz, wishes not only to debunk stereotyped views and Western myths that Muslim women are oppressed'. (Ahmedehussain, 2007) Kharal in his paper 'The Holy Woman: The Feminist Perspective' referring to anti-women traditions, comments, "these male-made...the time immemorial" (2001:53). Farida Shaheed, a sociologist and a woman's rights activist in Pakistan in her article 'Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy' rightly concludes "---Islamic injunctions protecting or promoting and continue to operate" (1991: 140). Nafeesa Shah a writer from Sindh, explains how women's bodies treated as a commodity is used to regulate settlements in Sindh (1995:225).

### III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

As most of the novels take its theme as the oppression of muslim women, Shahraz deals it from another point of view. Her protagonist in *The Holy Woman* is full of education and she has the best of this world but the old orthodox traditions come in her way. Zarri Bano, a beloved daughter of a loving father becomes a prey to the cruelty of her own loving father. Even though she has been brought up to grow as a liberal woman with feminist approaches, but after the demise of her single brother, makes her life chaotic. Her loving father, to protect his property and fame, turns his beloved daughter into Shahzadi Ibadat (an old tradition in which a girl is compelled to marry the Holy Qur'an). Her feudal father intends to announce this marriage in a ceremony.

Such treatment of otherness and diaspora at socio-political level deteriorate the status of woman in society by authorizing men in all affairs of life. Zarri Bano, the protagonist of the novel, is a unique blend of old feudal customs and new changing trends. The readers are much impressed by the very first appearance of Zarri Bano who is clad in very vivid and

conspicuous dress with an insolent look in her eyes, in a village fair. Afterwards we know about Zarri Bano as the lovely daughter of a feudal father who loves his property as much as he loves his child. He is resolute to have a complete, unquestionable and uncontested grasp over the life of Zarri Bano.

Zarri Bano's character is full of complications contrasting with each other, rising up like violent waves, swiftly integrating with other and subsequently quietening down; prevailing tranquility and calmness on the surface. Zarri Bano is a university educated woman as compared to other daughters of other feudal lords of Sindh, who were not allowed to go outside of the four walls of their homes. The destinies of the two sisters were connected with Sikander who was first to marry with Ruby and then in the wake of her demise with Zarri Bano, whom he loved dearly.

Zarri Bano symbolises a woman who speaks instinctively but waits for some time to observe the reality. It seems to be an irritating and exasperating retort to her sister but this will unearth the inscrutabilities of Zarri Bano's life. Zarri Bano proclaims to her sister, "I am a free woman, I will decide...and I will be an old maid" (Shahraz 2001: IN-17).

Sudden changes take place in the life of Zarri Bano, bashing her in a precarious situation. The catastrophic demise of her single brother and her last meeting with Sikander takes place concurrently in her life. After the premature death of his only son, Bano's father is obsessed with the idea as how to solve the problem of his inheritance. And the solution lies in turning his endeared daughter into "Shahzadi Ibadat" (A Holy Woman). Zarri Bano had to decline her marriage with Sikander as her father is not ready to transfer his lands 'to some stranger who just happens to marry my daughter' (Shahraz 2001, 66).

It is at this point of the novel that the readers are stricken with a calamatic situation - a situation faced by hundreds of other Zari Banos. With all her freedom and with all her feminist views, Zarri Bano had become the victim of her father oppression and she had no courage and power to resist it. From the beginning she was a strong devotee of feminism but now she has become a pitiful affectee of the age-old tradition. Her own family that was a place of protection and safety, convene into a place of tyranny for the feeble Zarri Bano. The devotee, for the first time fallen in love, becomes affectee of a cruel, old convention damned even by her own religion but sustained by her social order. The irony of situation, here, is that it occurs not to a common and ordinary woman but to a woman who upholds feminist views.

Zarri Bano resists and fights for herself as expected. She implores her father- nowThe patriarch standing tall in front of her to order her life. "I want to be a normal woman, and live a normal life...I am not suited to that role" (Shahraz 2001: S5). Her mother comes to defend her, reproaches and appeals, all in a breathe, to her husband, "You and your father are the puppeteers Habib...your ressmeh', your tradition" (Shahraz 2001:71).

Zarri Bano's transformation from a liberated and self-governing woman to a dependent and subjugated woman is the real story of numerous women ensnared in the feudal culture. Her requests and protests are of no use and at last she succumbs to the male dominance. Shahrazad very skillfully takes her readers to the culmination point of the story when they hear Zarri Bano weeps for the loss of her freedom and her feminist stance. Zarri Bano herself is abacked at her transformed role; shrouded in Burqa now the real Zarri Bano is effaced. Shahrazad very dexterously draws the character of Zarri from a staunch devotee of feminism to a self-pitying affectee. Here the novelist very courageously shows the remonstrating voice of a flexible woman who is resolute not to bow down and leave her struggle. She says to her mother, "I am not only your daughter...but not willingly, Mother" (Shahrazad 2001:87).

In her novel Shahrazad condemns fundamentalist mania with conventional gender relations and the role of women as transmitters of culture and religion. In this way for the sake of preserving Islamic identity, women are forced to submit to patriarchal violence in the name of tradition. Women in Pakistan are forced to marry against their will. No woman can escape from this violence except a woman is 'chaste' and obedient. Zarri Bano exclaims with sorrow, How am I going to come to terms with a longing that has to be denied and to a life of sterility?' (Shahrazad 2001:163).

Does Zarri truly succumb? Does she allow her individuality be effaced permanently by the unusual announcement of such a father for whom his lands are more worthy than his child. By answering these questions, Shahrazad creates an agitation in the minds of her western perusers. She shifts the narrative from being only the tale of a woman fastened to rural Pakistan; her protagonist, wearing 'Burqa', which is commonly seemed as the symbol of male enslavement of female body, twirls into a world traveler. She starts travelling abroad, visits many other women and talks to them. Zarri Bano seems happier despite the fact of being a Holy Woman. A reader with a penetrating eye can understand that Zarri is properly knowing her rights bestowed on her by her religion; being fully educated she has the experience of working with an esteemed NGO of Pakistan; she is also well aware of her rights. But even then she succumbs to the customs of her society. She says that she has adopted herself to her new life of being the Holy Woman and that she has forgotten about marriage. But at the end of this discourse, she cries for Sikander. (Shahrazad 2001,272).

This, indeed, is the very essence of the narrative. It shows that Zarri Bano has not reconciled with her fate, and how can she make peace with her present state of affairs? She recites the Holy Qur'an and knows its message for justice.

One of the tenets of the informal settlements system is the concept of *izzat*, *Ghairat* or *Honour*. It plays a very crucial role in the lives of rural women. "In the Pakistan context it could be woman's assertion of sexual rights or defiance of dictatorial male attitudes towards sexual/marital choices, that is fornication and loss of virginity, premarital intercourse and out of wed-lock pregnancy, (Khan 2006:43).

According to this traditional feudal system, the male members of the society do not want that their lands may be transferred to another family by marrying their daughters to that family. Consequently, the introduction of the custom of woman's marriage to Qur'an that authorizes the feudals to have their women and properties in control. More than this the feudal lords support their tradition also from religion. In this way these hierarchal socio-religious codes leave a woman completely helpless. It is the death of Jafar (Zarri Bano's only brother) that brings a catastrophe in the life of Zarri Bano and disturbs the normal order of Habib's (her father) *Haveli* (Villa). Being a Holy Woman, Zarri Bano is not allowed to meet anyone even Sikander. Her father by announcing her marriage with the Holy Qur'an, invalidates her sexuality forever. Zarri Bano is baffled and ruined.

After getting control of various sources, the feudal lords become that much powerful socio-politically that they influence lives and events. So in making his daughter Zarri Bano 'Shahzadi Ibadat', Habib has some socio-political motives also. He is well aware of the fact that whatever the decision he takes against his daughter, will also strengthen his position in society. By binding Zarri Bano with the Holy Qur'an, Habib thinks that now the people will respect him more and they will come and take advice from his daughter

with regards to religion. In this way the novel explicitly represents the character of a feudal lord who wants to keep his status quo, uses various strategies to get power and victimize the other half.

No sooner than Zarri Bano resorts to the Holy Qur'an, her eyes open up; not to be expected from a woman of her caliber. She used to consider Islam as the religion of injustice especially towards women. She realises that Islam is not the religion of injustice but it has freed her from her futile thinking and vain practices. A woman like Zarri Bano who is irreligious and entertaining feminist stance, changes completely after becoming a Holy Woman. Once talking on religion in England, she answers a question on the observance of veil, 'It is true that I found it very strange trappings of female vanity' (Shahraz 2001:254).

She discards her mistaken belief that Islam debases women but she rather condemns the abortive efforts of West to create unnatural equality between the sexes. Zarri Bano, before becoming a holy woman, was quite ignorant of the teachings of Islam, now feels the true spirit of Islam which she realizes does not enslave women. It is interesting to note that after becoming Shahzadi Ibadat, Zarri Bano gets a lot of learning experience. Her holiness reinforces her soul and she becomes a kind, modest and sympathetic woman. She assures Sikander that in her present state she will enjoy more freedom and liberty which she could not enjoy even as a university student. Later on she favors the decision of her father in these words, "In fact, my role as a holy woman ...commitment to our faith" (Shahraz 2001:125).

Her dedication after becoming the Holy Woman portrays the picture of a woman who has strong Asian qualities and who has devoted herself to family and culture. As good luck would have it, when her father feels remorse on his decision, says to Zarri, "I want to make amends ... full blessings" (Shahraz 2001: 187), but she reiterates her vow not to marry forever. But unluckily the unexpected demise of her sister 'Ruby' who had been married to Sikander, deteriorates her completely. When her mother implores her to marry Sikander only for the sake of Haris (her nephew), she retorts in the following words, "How convenient of you to remind me now ... contemplate wedlock" (Shahraz 2001:349).

The relationship between Zarri Bano and Sikander has been commented upon by Qaisra Shahraz herself in these words; "There was love-hate ... back together again." (2007). Finally Zarri Bano chooses to marry Sikander on her own terms for the sake of her nephew. It is crystal clear that she has been maltreated by the patriarchal society but thanks to her knowledge of Islam that she has been purgated of her false beliefs.

The novel assigns Shahraz and her mouth piece, Zarri Bano the status of 'faith-based feminists'. They no more think of Islam to be the religion of injustice towards women; they consider traditions and misapprehension of Islam responsible for this confusion. A famous faith-based feminist, Zine writes, "Muslim feminists such as Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and Azzizah al- Hibri do not consider the hijab ... style of dress in schools and other public institutions' (2006:9). It also seems to be the case with Qaisra Shahraz.

The novel ends showing Zarri and Sikander leading a normal matrimonial life. Sikander confers complete autonomy and emancipation on her. He says, "Let the passionate woman come to life again ... as threat to yourself, but as a friend" (Shahraz 2001). Zarri Bano's marriage with Sikander implies that she has now full command over her life and body. More than this the circumstances also favours her in the sense that she gets the love of a man whom she dearly loved once. Sikander bows down on his knees and offers to do anything for his love.

In making Zarri to marry Sikander, Shahraz puts forward her views that the physical needs of a woman must not be ignored by a woman; even if she remains Shahzadi Ibadat. In the case of Zarri Bano, complete peace is restored when she reconciles her two opposite selves, her spiritual and her physical selves. In this regard the views of Shahraz are completely opposite to that of Bapsi Sidhwa's. Sidhwa is a Pakistani fiction writer who holds religion responsible for the oppression of women. Qaisra Shahraz's views about religion also matches with the views of another Pakistani writer Tehmina Durrani who also believes like Shahraz that culture is responsible for the sufferings of women not religion. Tehmina's novel *Blasphemy* (1995) also highlights the misuse of Islam by muslim feudals. Both the protagonists, Zarri Bano in *The Holy Woman* and Heer in *Blasphemy*, behave in their own way, assuring that they would not be suppressed by culture, society and the misuse of religion. Both of them are able to face the future by giving new dimensions to their life.

Being a Muslim and a native writer, Qaisra Shahraz not only brings to light the massive truth about Western Orientalism but also the obscurantist discourses that lessens the complications of women's

experiences in their respective countries. Notwithstanding, Shahraz believes that the problem lies with erroneous culture for the suppression of women. More than this she thinks that both the views must drop the limits they keep, as both of them support either cultural imperialism or religious extremism. After their marriage, Zarri Bano and Sikander give their life a new dimension, in which Sikander is all prepared to fulfill the needs of his new wife to live cheerfully. He goes against the traditional order that is practiced commonly in South-Asian cultures. The novel also highlights the fact that the growth of an individual does not smother by marriage, as is the case with Zarri Bano, but rather facilitates her in shaping her identity in the context of Pakistan.

Through her novel 'The Holy Woman', Qaisra Shahraz ascertainment the belief that Islam is not a religion that hates the other half as is believed in the west. She is at daggers drawn with those secular scholars who reduce Islam to women suppression. She puts forward that now it is a high time to go ahead and bring harmony among the feminists having different points of view. Mir-Hosseni (1999) also strengthens the same point for Muslim women when she writes, "It is important to... can Muslim women benefit from it and its agenda" (1999:59).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The portrayal of rural life in Qaisra Shahraz *The Holy Woman* is outstanding yet she has given a tough time to the feminists by writing this novel. She is to be blamed for producing such characters as 'Zarri Bano' who is not as much unruly as ought to be, being feminist. Shahraz heroines become phantasmagorical for their ideal stance. Shahraz is well aware of the fact that there are changes coming in society. The women of the rural areas of Pakistan in particular and the women of the urban areas in general are living in deeply suppressed societies. Although she wants to bring reforms yet she is not radical. There is a gulf of differences between her views and the views of her generation. Shahraz considers that women should develop their state in society by amalgamating the traditional with the modern like her protagonist, Zarri Bano. Culture and tradition are held responsible for the oppression of women by her. So women appear to be subjugated in real life. How can women get a powerful role in society is to know about their rights in Islam and to know the emerging cultural norms with regards to the needs of a modern woman. Shahraz supports Islamic teachings as regards women rights as she considers that cultural interpretation of religion and lust for feudal power create frightful threats to the freedom of women in the rural areas of Pakistan. She further proclaims that western kind of feminism is not supposed to be triumphant in Pakistan because in Pakistan most of the people have no contact with modern technology and other western tools of propagation, only the upper class people can avail these things. Most of the people are still in love with eastern way of life in Pakistan. Shahraz is in favour of a more engaged feminism in Pakistan, she thinks that there must be a discourse between the women of the developing countries and the developed countries so that the women of these countries may be able to know the resemblance and dissimilarities. Such steps can help create uniformity among feminist variants and can also be helpful in fighting against the oppressions of fake-orientalism as well as religious extremism. With these points of view, Shahraz enjoys a prestigious position among the novelists in Pakistan. She is a realistic writer; she tries to portray things as they really are. If the protagonists of Qaisra Shahraz do not enjoy complete freedom, it is because women are not too much independent in the rural areas of Pakistan.

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