

Feminization of Pakistani Political Discourse in Mumtaz Shahnawaz's *The Heart Divided*

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The political history of Pakistan included women out of political necessity to procure support for the establishment of Pakistan. This struggle on the part of women finds its place in the political discourse in Pakistani fiction. Shahnawaz's narrative, in her novel *The Heart Divided* (1957), is most dominant of all in this connection, which portrayed the voice of the struggle of the educated and politically active women. The political struggle contextualizes the current socio-political scenario of Pakistani women and necessitates the exploration of political discourse to find the extent to which it is feminized in the Pakistani context. After Shahnawaz, Bapsi Sidhwa introduced the tumultuous political scenes of the partition process and attempted a feminized political discourse of Pakistan, especially in her novel *Ice-Candy Man* (1988). Though Zulifkar Ghose, in his novel *Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967), does refer to the aftermaths of the partition process, he did not see it with reference to the women's discourses. Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989) also looks at the partition process with the eye of a woman, but the pre-partition political history of Pakistan with a feminist point of view is portrayed in the direct context of the politically charged environment of the Indo-Pak subcontinent in the 1940s in *The Heart Divided* (1957). This is the discourse that offers the readers the struggle of women which simultaneously reflected the modernization of Muslim women as well as friction that women had to face because of the patriarchal political discourse available during and before the Pakistan movement (1940s)

The need to question such a political discourse is because of the fact that the level of freedom of choice is determined by the level of freedom of its women and the right of choice exercised by the women. Similarly the level of civilization of a society is determined from the way the women are treated by collective society. Moreover the debate has established the analogy between postcolonialism and feminism because both oppose oppression of the dominant power and has also led to the feminizing of the political discourse, especially in the former European colonies. Jain (1997) also views literature as a cultural construct which reflects socio-political concerns of the age. She further says that the novel in India was more than a narrative device, rather it was an interrogation of political reality wherein the women writers expressed a new self-awareness and through which they attempted to construct an independent identity.

In this regard, only the discussion about Shahnawaz's novel *The Heart Divided* has been explored to determine to what extent Shahnawaz feminizes the political discourse of Pakistan and the consequences it had on the later Pakistani political discourses it had in postcolonial Pakistan, for example the short stories by Hameedullah (1957) and those of Tallat Abassi (2001). This novel is selected because it is the most relevant to this discourse and is written by a woman novelist. Mumtaz Shahnawaz particularly refers to the following passage of the novel which introduces her female characters:

Zohra and Mohni are the respective daughters of Sheikh Jamaluddin and Kailash Nath Kaul. Soon after Zohra's brother Habib comes back from England, Mohni, who has been ill, arrives unexpectedly for the festivities at the wedding of Zohra's elder sister, Sughra. (Shamsie 1998, 29)

The passage shows that the political discourse is viewed through the eyes of a female character, Zohra, and all the events related in the novel are somehow related to her. Even the love matter of her brother is with her friend Mohni. It is she who seems to be the protagonist of the novel. Zohra is portrayed as an educated young Muslim woman who is deeply influenced by the politically charged environment of India of the 1940s. Her deep interest in the political scenario of that time makes her involved with the cause of the freedom and independence of Muslim women. The writer has projected her character as a symbol of the change in the appearance of Muslim women and their participation in the political affairs. The writer, being a woman, sees the political discourse of Pakistan through the angle of a woman character. This is the first attempt of feminizing the political discourse of Pakistan even before the establishment of Pakistan.

Shahnawaz was not only a political worker but also had a deep sense of understanding about the changing role of the rich and poor women in India. She created the images of educated and politically active women who tried to stand side by side with their men and took part in many political activities. This could be the first step to the socio-political awareness of women which may lead them to their emancipation and empowerment. But this could not be realized so soon because this political awareness was available only at the politically important upper level of society or at the elite class level. The majority of women were still under the oppressive power of custom and tradition. Even these educated women failed in achieving equality and independence. But all this represents the start of the conflict between the culture conservatism and the will for independence and the first steps of change that could come in the lives of women. Shamsie says that Shahnawaz's novel, *The Heart Divided* (1957), mainly describes the struggle of

the Muslim women, which was waged by them for the sake of independence. In this way, the novel very clearly brings before us the picture of the educated, brave, and active women of the Pakistan movement before the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. “Her narrative is permeated by a strong consciousness of herself as an educated Muslim woman and political activist, welding both the personal and the public” (Shamsie 2005, 40).

In contrast to Ali (1940), Shahnawaz (1957) portrayed women in the light of the political movement for freedom that was going on at that time in the name of the independence movement. This gave a new boost to the fiction of that time. Shahnawaz (1957) not only took part in the early phase of the Pakistan movement but also did quality work by producing masterpieces like *The Heart Divided* (1957). Ali, in his novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), also portrayed the socio-political condition of men and women in the pre-partition Indo-Pak subcontinent. His women characters, like Begum Mir Nihal, Mehru and Begum Waheed, all seem untouched by the political situation around them. Ali (1940) portrayed his women characters as simply involved in the traditional domestic and social activities of that time in Muslim India. On the other hand, the only novel produced by Shahnawaz (1957) is a vivid account of the educated Muslim women and their lives in the British India just before partition. Her women are relatively more independent than that of any other writer of that time. She shows the women engaged in struggle against the social and political taboos. But this political independence does not lend them social independence, which is why they ultimately fail to fight against the social taboos.

The Heart Divided by Shahnawaz (1957) portrays Zohra, a young and beautiful daughter of Sheikh Jamaludin. Sughra is the elder sister of Zohra. But while Sughra vows to be more traditional, Zohra wants freedom to exercise her will. Though Sughra too changes her point of view in the later part of novel, in the beginning she tries to adhere to the social norms and customs as much as she can. On the other hand, Zohra is able to get a college education, but Sughra remains shy and reluctant in breaking traditions like *Purdah*. Zohra is able to break some of the boundaries. She, for example, attends gatherings and makes speeches and wins contests also. She becomes a lecturer and lives away from home. She continues to defy the tradition of *Purdah* and *Burqa*ⁱ again and again while she was still a student with the help of her friends, like Surraya. Yet her point of view is that she wants to fulfill the demands of the family as much as possible. Zohra says to herself that “she would live up to her ideals of Muslim womanhood: A dutiful daughter, a loving wife and a devoted mother” (Shahnawaz 1957, 7). This is the stamp she neither succeeds to realize nor is able to shed. Ahmed (2009) thinks that this is the very conflict which postcolonial women in Pakistan have been suffering from.

Zohra is able to get the support of her brother Habib also in order to maintain and to achieve freedom from the social taboos hindering the progress of women. The political environment of that time grew gradually conducive to the women like Zohra who could free themselves from their unjust social limitations. This was symbolic of the freedom that the Muslims were about to get if their freedom movement succeeded. Zohra is very much willing to defy the tradition of *Purdah* because she thinks that it hinders the progress of women and that she could maintain her purity even without this. She occasionally tries to flout this unnecessary ban of *Purdah* with her friend Surraya. This change in the attitude of the Muslim women outlook about *Purdah* is the part of a larger level of change in the mindset of so many intellectuals of the age. A renowned social reformer and novelist of the latter half of nineteenth century, Nazir Ahmed, acknowledges that “moral structure of the Muslim society was based on *Purdah* of women but this did not mean that Muslim women were to be confined to their homes or deprived of life’s happiness” (Ali 2000, 09). This was very deeply resented, but still these young girls continued to defy the ban wherever it was possible. The writer tells us in the words of one of the minor characters in the novel as to how the forces of conservatism in culture were struggling with the forces of independence and freedom for women,

That Surraya who goes about like a Farangan Memⁱⁱ and some Hindu girls. Well, it seems upon being told it would take 20 minutes to get the car going, all three of them jumped out of the car, called a Tonga and drove away in it, God knows where they went. And mind you, Zohra Bibi was without her *Burqa*. (Shahnawaz 1957, 13)

This defiance of *Purdah* discussed by the writer is more a deliberate discourse rather than a mere description. *Purdah* may be taken as an institution designed to control the movement of women. The freedom and independence of Indo-Pak continent meant the empowerment of the colonized people which would allow them to shift from slavery to the mastership of their own destinies. If women were to remain within the confinement of the socially designed institutions, the freedom would not mean the same for Muslim women. Therefore, the writers wanted to give a message through the portrayal of her women characters that the freedom for women should also mean their freedom from unnecessary controls on their lives. If it did not happen, they would remain colonized beings even after decolonization.

The portrayal of Zohra shows that she is a woman who not only has rich resources to support her but is also equipped with a modern western education.

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Her portrayal shows her as an intelligent and educated young woman who would love to achieve and maintain her freedom at all costs and who would like to play her role willingly in the freedom movement of the country. Such women characters are the role models created by Shahnawaz (1957). The process of claiming such a social position for women had already started because of the passage of various bills of the government in favour of women. “The communalization of female political identity started after the Act of 1935” (Ali 2000, 195). Women in undivided India were claiming this role, again because of their achievement with reference to the Pakistan movement. Ali (2000) further points out that their participation in such a movement was the direct result of the confidence they had achieved because of education and awareness to their rights and their experiences in the public and political life (Ali 2000, 43). Zohra’s character portrayal is the best example of the conflict between the new found freedom because of the modern education and the family conservatism which tried to restrict her movement and body. These two forces were at war with each other and the general social set up was still not so ripe to accept this change in the educated Muslim. It was, however, the political struggle and the common cause of freedom that has allowed a relative freedom to the women as well as by making them an active part of the political agenda.

Though the political environment lent courage and freedom to the women of the rich Muslims, at least, the social bindings and the limitations were still very strong and the educated Muslim women had to face social stigma. The conflict is also shown in the character portrayal of Sughra, another woman character portrayed by Shahnawaz (1957), who is the sister of Zohra. She is less interested in politics and society. Though educated, she is not willing to spend time in politics or the other gatherings. She therefore says ‘yes’ to her parents when they suggest her marriage to Mansur. But after getting married, she could not resist the desire for an active political and social life. It was not possible for her to live under strict *Purdah*. She tried to live by the social system, but the constant bickering of her in-laws ignited in her the desire to exercise her rights. She is educated and knows her rights, but she tries to give a chance to herself to uphold the values of her father. She keeps in mind the views of her father that “the *Purdah* of our women is sacred, I tell you, no woman of our family shall break it, while I live—yes, while I live” (Shahnawaz 1957, 70) but still decides to take action to get control of her life. This is the first such daring step mentioned by a writer in this part of the world.

But even if it is accepted that the rich and educated women liked to stay at home to serve their families, as said by Ali (1940), it would be wrong because Sughra could maintain her status as a house-wife only for a few months and started to feel the need of doing something for her nation in general, and for her

women-fellows, in particular. After the death of her son, her domestic and motherhood passion subsided, and her social side was roused sharply. She leaves her husband's home never to enter again. She develops a niche in her mind for doing social work. It created a stir in her about the social work and that pushed her again to her best side which was to devote her time and energy for her people as a social worker.

The portrayal of Sughra seems to support the idea that men and women who work for the social benefit cannot pay much attention to their family life in a traditional manner, especially in a society like that of Pakistan. They have to sacrifice one or the other. In fact, it was the spirit of the 1940s for the participation of women in the freedom movement that had infused into the mind of everyone who had a political and social consciousness of the time. The women of Muslim houses, especially the educated ones, were not away from it; rather, they had started to play an active role in the politics of the country. Such women were the role models of struggle and change for the next coming generations of Pakistan. Zohra, Mohni, and Sughra, in this novel, are the prototypes in this regard.

The portrayals of Zohra, Sughra, and Mohni show clearly that the educated rich women do not want to support the idea that women should be kept in seclusion or *Purdah*, and that is why we have the portrayals promoting non-observance of *Purdah*. Shahnawaz (1957) has also propagated that:

‘Times are changing’, said Habib for the second time that day. ‘Some Muslim ladies in other parts of India actually took part in the civil Disobedience Movement last year, and even from our own province, a Muslim lady had gone to the round-table conference. I remember all the English papers praising her speeches last year. Our women must come out of *Purdah* now for we shall never make progress until they do.’ (Shahnawaz 1957, 69)

Among all these women characters, the mother of Zohra is rich but a very traditional character who would like to stay in her family and work at home and run for the comfort of the family, because she belongs to the old generation which was also influenced by the old traditions to change themselves because of the modern awareness in the social set up. She had received the impact of neither the colonialism nor the modern western education. She was bound to tradition and was not ready to accept the change. She was rather shocked, sometimes, at the modern and changing roles that her daughters were playing. But the over-all environment had influenced her: also she started to accept the change in her

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daughters. It means that the portrayal of the mother is also shown to be flexible and willing to change for the greater role, which women played during the pre-independence era. According to Ali (2000) the participation of women in the political process and birth of role models like Fatima Jinnahⁱⁱⁱ and Begum Shahnawaz not only indicate the rising awareness of Muslim women of their rights but also that the freedom movement would not have succeeded without the active involvement of these women. But it is a reality that efforts for freedom of women and conservatism were present and equally impressed themselves on the lives of women in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

The character portrayal of Zohra and Sughra are those political constructs which were outcomes of the new political role assigned to women because of the national liberation movement and later Pakistan movement. It was successful after the reformists' agenda and the access of women to modern education, heavily supported and encouraged by the British Rule as well as Christian missionaries in India. The women like Zohra are the prototype of the women struggling on the path of liberation, emancipation, and empowerment in conformity with the vision of Jinnah about the liberation of women. This was the very change that had come in the identities of women first because of the colonizers and second because of anti-colonialists. But it must be pointed out that all this was happening at the higher level of the society; the fruit of this liberation were yet to reach the common women of India and Pakistan. But whatever the case may be, the character of Zohra goes to prove that women are capable of performing great deeds if they are encouraged and given independence to play their role in the society. But men would not allow it until it became absolutely necessary because of the political demands as it happened in case of Pakistan movement. Women proved that they could also be as great leaders as men could be at any place or time. The concept of their being inferior is only due to man constructed identity. The novel also debates the lack of inter-racial harmony which becomes a source of pain for women because they fail to implement their decision in their lives. The portrayal of Mohni in *The Heart Divided* (1957) manifests this situation. Mohni, a Hindu educated and politically active girl loved Habib, a Muslim brother of Zohra. Not only the society but also the law prevented this situation. However, the British law allowed the inter-racial marriage under certain provisions, but Mohni was unable to cross the religio-politic boundaries that prohibited such a union. She was educated and was well provided for but these two things did not enable her to decide her life and to implement her decisions as well. The same lack of empowerment exists even today. Shahnawaz (1957) highlighted this issue while writing in the 1940s.

The portrayal of women by Shahnawaz (1957) in her novel is that of role-models, reflected in her fiction and shows that some women were able to cross the

barriers of *Purdah*, *Izzat*^v, and other taboos of the society. These role-model women tried to maintain their hard-earned status after the struggle for independence was over and Pakistan was established. They did not surrender to the whims of the hard-line religious elements and continued to stress their experiences for the benefit of women in the newly born state. One of the specific examples, in this connection, is the establishment of All-Pakistan Women's Association, which became a symbol of women's feminist behaviour in the history of the struggle for women's social rights in Pakistan.

This discussion on the political role of women, as portrayed by Shahnawaz (1957), problematizes the history and politics defined previously in terms of male dominance. Shahnawaz being a women writer, further put to question the political history of Pakistan which has been seen and portrayed through the eyes of a woman in this novel. This phenomenon of the political discourse by Shahnawaz problematizes the whole established patriarchal tradition of the Indo-Pak subcontinent where women have been considered as 'Others' by men and in this discourse we see that women perform the same as men. Therefore, the portrayal of the political history of Pakistan through female characters is the first major attempt by any Pakistani writer, especially at the time when there was relatively low level of freedom available for a woman writer and the people were not willing to accept this new role of women, but it goes to speak volumes about the will and intention of the political leadership working at the forefront of Pakistan Movement during the 1940s. The leadership at that time advocated a proper role for women in the political system of that time, but as is witnessed the women were recolonized after the establishment of Pakistan and the attempts of women writers like Shahnawaz and the Muslim political leader were foiled.

This feminized discourse, on the one hand brings before us the vision of the woman writer about the perceptions of educated woman regarding the Pakistani political history being shaped during the 1940s, but it also makes *The Heart Divided* (1957) a particular postcolonial Pakistani feminist discourse which questions the disappearance of the majority of women in the most significant political event in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. This is evident from the discourses of the writers like Ahmed Ali, who were writing with the overtones of progressive attitude but failed to give the similar space to the role of women in the political history of that time. The male writers of 1940s probably committed a deliberate exclusion of women's political representation from their discourses.

The feminized discourse by Mumtaz Shahnawaz may be taken as a deliberate attempt for the representation of women in the Pakistani political discourse. This aspect of Shah Nawaz's fiction makes a text of Pakistani

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postcolonial feminism become a source of awakening of Muslim women for their rights in postcolonial Pakistan.

ⁱ *Burqa* is an overall type garment to cover woman from top to bottom.

ⁱⁱ Local version of the word Ma'am.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fatima Jinnah is the sister of the Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah who headed the movement for establishment of Pakistan. Miss Fatima stood by him in all public gatherings.

^{iv} *Izzat* is concept developed by the patriarchal societies like Pakistan and can be roughly translated as the concept of honour based on social prestige.

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