

**Haq Bakhshish (Marriage to Quran): A Custom
Confused With Religion: A Case Study of Qaisra
Sharaz's Protagonist 'Zari Bano' From the Novel
Holy Woman**

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Abstract

Pakistan is a country whose constitution and legal system is enshrined in the doctrines of Islam while the socio cultural practices are confused. The present study is a case of the protagonist Zari Bano, from the novel Holy Woman. The girl is married to Quran as per a feudal custom Haq Bakshish, and entered in to the life of sterility and celibacy. The course of events have been critically analysed against different Pakistani feminists views which unsnarls the traumatic experience of such custom prevailing in Pakistan specifically in rural Sindh. The study excavates and puts forth the detrimental coalescence of custom and religion, where Zari Bano is made her father's legal heiress but robbed off her matrimonial rights. The study highlights how religion is used as a handy tool to persecute woman and authenticate and legitimize feudal and patriarchal oppression. The study discloses Islamic inheritance system and its customary manipulation, psychological dilemma and misogynist attitude of the feudal lords. The study brings forth Shahraz's challenge to the feudal and patriarchal order and opens up a way to understand the violence ritualized in such customs and displays that

such man made inhumane customs can be questioned,
shunned and altogether rejected.

Keywords: *Haq Bakhshish, shahzadi I ibadat (holy woman),
customs, religion, celibacy*

Introduction

Status of Women: Religio- Historical Perspective

With the advent of Islam, there came exaltation in the status of women. A review of pre and post Islamic world portrays the change. The status of women from a captive, bondmaid and a seducer to an equal social member and shareholder in inheritance is the proof (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Smith (1979) highlights the fact that Islam is the religion that brought forth the rights of women for the very first time in the era when women were believed to be the property of their menfolk. Islam legalizes their rights in various areas like marriage, divorce, property and inheritance. Armstrong (2006) highlights the historical fact that in the pre Islamic era women were not allocated any part in the property of their men be it father or husband. women were considered no better than a slave and their status was stooped so low that she was burnt and buried alive in various cases, Islam with Prophet P.B.U.H came up with socio economic rights of the women and Prophet P.B.U.H became the first feminist, whose teaching immersed in Islamic doctrines exalted the status of women as an equal to men. “The Qur’an was attempting to give women a legal status that most Western women would not enjoy until the nineteenth century. The emancipation of women was a project dear to the Prophet’s heart...” (Armstrong 2006 p.147)

Customs and the status of women

Feudal system engrained in Pakistani society is also a strong subsidiser to subjugate Pakistani women and deprive them from their legal rights. A proverb declined from such system Zan zar zameen (woman, money and land) the cause of all evil also encapsulates the dictum that woman is inherently evil and not equal to man in terms of honour, status and prestige (Ali and Gavino 2008). Feudal system obsessed with honour and prestige associate its steadiness and stability with the control over the women folk, men proclaim themselves as their protector and guardian “specifically controlling the female body, in terms of both its sexuality and its reproductive ability. Thus, when a

woman's behaviour is seen to threaten the patriarchal order, it is her body that is punished" (Bhattacharya). According to Guha (1987), women are usually considered as objects to satisfy male ego and lust while woman's honour in a patriarchal society lies in her virginity. Men inflicts punishments on her body if she tries to trespass the boundaries set by the society. Like honour killing, Ghag (forced marriages), karo kari, Walwar (selling of Bride), haq bakhshish (Marriage to Quran). Shaheed (1991), asserts that Feudal system strengthened owing to British Raj as they empowered the lords. Shamsie (2005), states that with over the years this feudal system fortified and "customs were confused with religion"

Women experience multiple types of violence clad in the name of religious and customary laws sometimes as a victim but mostly as a tradition of subservience and acceptance without questioning. Women in Pakistan have small choices except to submit to a subservience decreed by a highly inequitable socio economic order buttressed by a thin veneer of ostensibly Islamic morality (Jalal). According to Asia Watch Committee as jalal says many of the women exhibit subservience owing to ignorance and many willingly surrender them as it is socially rewarding. "The average woman of Pakistan is born in slavery, leads a life of drudgery and dies invariably in oblivion" (1992)

Representation of Women in Shahraz's Fiction

Qaisra Shahraz, Pakistan born, English writer whose fiction frequently exhibits the exploitation of women belonging to all social strata of Pakistani society. Her perspicacious details of the customs and tradition specifically belonging to the rural Sindh in her first two novels *The Holy Women* and *Typhoon* reflects that she has never been away from Sindh (Zaidi 2012).

Traditions and conventions are indispensable parts of a Pakistani patriarchal society where women are subjugated and exploited by the patriarchs. The customs are given religious colour and the patriarchs authenticate and legitimize the inhuman practices on religious grounds. Women are forcibly subjugated and sometimes they show subservience readily as such attitude of them is socially rewarding. With her debut novel *The Holy women*, Shahraz breaks the conventional norms by challenging and countering the centuries old conventional practice of Haq Bakhshish (marrying a girl to Quran). The protagonist, a 28 year old breathtakingly beautiful and astonishingly intellectual girl Zari Bano, who has been herself a

feminist and whose aim was to be a publisher, suddenly turned in to Shahzad-I –ibadat owing to the death of her only brother Jaffer. Her father decided to make her his heiress. The novel records the inner scuffle that Zari Bano had to endure after she was given the black long veil to wear. She felt powerless and feeble under it. According to Zaidi “In between the lines of her narrative, Shahraz skilfully deconstructs the Islamophobic discourses of the orientalist, contests the fundamentalist stances, and engages the reader in negotiating a much-needed change for gender equation” (2012).

According to Siddiqui (2011) “Her feminist writings vehemently uncover the weight of the patriarchal order in an ideologically- biased Pakistani Islamic context, unveil the misuse of Islam in depriving women of their human and sexual rights.” (2011, p. 40)

Review of the Related Literature

Literature is borne out of a society where its origin lies. The portrayal of women in literature imparts an inclusive and truth to nature understanding of the status of women in that society (Ahmed 2009). Pakistani English literature specifically fiction, has been aptly prolific and operative in making the silence of subservience, heard. Chaudhry in her wide review of Pakistani fiction quotes Shahraz’ and Sidwa’s fiction as unfolding various tactics of exploitation by Pakistani patriarchal society in the name of socio cultural and religious laws. “Through sexual awakening, sexual victimisation (rape, forced marriage) and sexual discrimination Sidhwa, Shahraz and Ahmad’s women learn of the gendered oppression that works through their bodies”(Chaudhry 2013). Saleem 2012, highlights Meatless Days of Suleri as a memoir protesting female oppression through wrong interpretation and ill understanding of the Islamic laws. “The memoir further seeks to explore a patriarchal society where religion is used to circumscribe and exploit women” (Saleem 2012). Faridah 2006 in her critical review of Pakistani fiction quotes So That You Can Know Me (published by the Pakistani Academy of Letters, 1994) in which there comes a short story “The Spell and the Ever-changing Moon” by Rukhsana Ahmed and asserts that the story maintains a space in the anthology owing to its exhibition of social customs and Islamic laws misinterpreted in the Pakistani patriarchal society. The women in the story is encouraged to continue the marriage with a drunkard and cruel husband on the pretext that God is going to reward her silence and obedience hereafter (Faridah 2006). Chaudhry (2013) encapsulated

Shahraz's fiction in an analysis that her fiction displays that women's struggle emanates from her body as it is the body that men endeavour to confiscate physically, emotionally or sexually. As the women bodies are considered to be the symbol of man and family honour. Zia (2013) reviews the fiction produced by Aslam and demonstrates the exploitation of his female characters in marriage then Talaq (Divorce) and halala (Zia 2013). Ehsaan and Tabbasum (2015) in their feminist analysis of feudal lord asserts that feudal world treats the women as a commodity or object in terms of its physical usage. Physical and emotional violence are part and parcel and wife beatings is routine practice Pakistani patriarchal society. Durrani undergoes all this (Ehsaan and Tabbasum 2015). According to Omer (2008), Tehmina in her autobiography asserts that there elapsed not a single day when Mustafa had not hit or beat her and Tehmina endured everything because of her social training that a woman has to endure everything as she has to continue her relationship. Women in Pakistani patriarchal society is chained she cannot exercise her freewill and she is not let free to choose her clothes. Amirio (2017) in his study quotes the theme of a short story A Pair of Jeans by Qaisra Shahraz and highlights a social reality that a girl became victim of the harsher attitude of the society as her dressing did not conform to the dress code that the patriarchal society has set for the women.

DISCUSSION

The Holy Woman by Qaisra Shahraz opens up presenting its strikingly beautiful and fashionable protagonist Zari Bano who belongs to the feudal family of rural Sindh. She herself is a feminist, a University Degree holder, who wants to establish a publishing company, she is 27 and had declined many suitors but finally fell in love with a man of charismatic personality Sikander. The university education has emboldened her and her actions do not conform to the feudal world. As she decided to marry Sikander her only brother Jaffer accidently dies and her father Habib Khan resolved to make Zari Bano his legal heiress.

Imprisoned Female Sexuality and Feudal Violence

Shahrazad narrative According to Bhattacharya "specifically controlling the female body, in terms of both its sexuality and its reproductive ability. Thus, when a woman's behaviour is seen to threaten the patriarchal order, it is her body that is punished" (Bhattacharya). Shahraz's protagonist Zari Bano, a feminist who

acquired university education yet when she stayed at Sikander's home and family, the grandfather displayed his severe resentment and questioned her son and daughter in law "Are you telling me, Shahzada, that my young unmarried granddaughter has gone to stay all alone on a strange family's home and is in the company of a single young man?" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 23). As per the feudal customs, women must not be left or permitted to stay away from their homes without their menfolk. Shahrazad demonstrates the feudal mentality every time when they come in contact with the women. All their respect, honour and prestige is associated with their strict hold on their women physically as well as psychologically. Habib khan turned violent when he came to know that Zari Bano is interested to marry Sikender. He rebuked his wife Shahzada and pronounced his verdict as "in our clan, destinies are made by us (the men), I will decide if this man is going to be my daughter's destiny or not" (Shahraz, 2001, p.23).

When the only son of Habib khan died accidentally he decided to make Zari Bano the elder daughter as his legal heiress. "You father want to make you his legal heiress, our Shehzad I ibadat, the holy women in the traditional way. Zari Bano was startled to listen the feudal verdict for her. Her world turned topsy-turvy. Being Shahzadi Ibadat and dedicate her life for prayers and religion was strange for her. She is the modern, educated girl from the feudal family who hardly covered her hair and hardly prayed the obligatory prayers. She beseeched her father "I want to be a normal woman, Father, and live a normal life! I want to get married!" listening such words from Zari Bano, Habib Khan turned angry, the feudal lord infuriated in him and "what you want to say is that you want a man in your life". Zari bano was startled to understand the sexual connotation inside it. She was banned a normal life and her demand for marriage with Sikander was linked with sexual desire for having a man in her life. Being a patriarch he punishes the body of her daughter by shunning any man to her associating the demand of Zari Bano with his honour and izzat.

A Feminist turned Holy Woman (Shahzadi Ibadat)

Zari Bano herself understands the barbaric strain in his father's actions and keeping aside all her postgraduate education and women right activism she has been engaged in, she passively accepts her father's decision. Talking to her professor she humourlessly states that now she can design a new research title for her students based on Zari Bano's case, "A Feminist turned Holy Woman" (Shahraz, 2001, p.114).

Haq Bakhshish (Marriage to Quran): A Coalescence of Custom and Religion

Shahrazad's narrative in Holy woman enroots in the custom which is commonly known in the rural Sindh as Haq bakhshish, a tradition when the family does not have any male heir to their property, the elder daughter of the family is made a legal heiress in a mock marriage ceremony and the girl is married to Quran. Shahraz shows that after the accidental death of the only son, Habib Khan having consultation with his father resolved to make Zari Bano his legal Heiress, "you know very well about our tradition, about the male heir dying and the eldest daughter becoming a Shahzadi ibadat" (Shahraz, 2001, p.153).

Marriage with Quran, on the face of it, is presented as a religious ceremony, the bride is revered and idealized as a religious icon. Zari Bano's father Habib Khan proudly claims that the role of a Shahzad I Ibadat will bring glory and honour to Zari Bano and the whole family. My Zari Bano is to be my heiress, our holy woman. She will become a scholar of Islam, moral and religious tutor to hundreds of young women in our town and province. A female symbol of purity and ibadat in its purest form (Shahraz, 2001, p.153) while Habib Khan's prime purpose of following the family tradition is to save the lands of his clan. "I have no son, to whom I am going to bequeath these lands. I am not going to hand it over to some strangers who just happens to marry my daughter" (Shahraz, 2001, p.66).

Haq Bakhshish and Female Celibacy

Haq bakhshwana (marriage to Quran) is a custom that is the creation of patriarchal order which is legitimized by the employment of religious sentiments so that it may not get questioned. As Habib Khan clearly asserts that he cannot marry Zari Bano to any man as it would make some other man a shareholder in his property, lands and money which he cannot tolerate at any cost. Shahzada (Zari Bano's mother), protested that you are intended to marry your daughter to your fields. How a father can reward her beautiful daughter a barren life. she cries "to keep the land in the family, my daughter is destined to remain forever barren and childless, denied the joys of motherhood, her arms never to know the joys of holding a new born child to her breast" (Shahraz, 2001, p.70).

Sikander, in his heated arguments with Zari Bano, who passively resolved to be her clan's Shazadi ibadat, struggled to make her understand the gravity of injustice being inflicted on her by denying her the rights of marriage to a man and ruthlessly pushing her in to the life of barrenness and celibacy. He explains her that the religion in whose name the rights of a girl is being exploited actually gives her right to make her own choices. When he comes to know about Zari Bano's veiling ceremony, he was enthralled to get the news "in Islam there are no nuns, no such things no women married to the Holy Quran! Have they studied the Holy Quran, where it categorically states that widows and divorcees should be encouraged to remarry at the first opportunity? So how can a beautiful young maiden be deliberately denied marriage? (Shahraz, 2001, p.117).

The Marriage of Holy Woman (Shahzadi Ibadat): Shahraz Bashing the Politics of Misogyny

As per the prevalent practice, Haq Bakshwana (the marriage to Quran) cannot be questioned, challenged or dissolved in Pakistani patriarchal society. "The brothers or fathers refusal to marry the women in both cases and the families silence and absence of help of any sort, points to a cultural immunity for those demanding marriage to the Quran, at least in the area wherein these cases have emerged" (Zaman,2014). Once a girl is married to Quran can never resume her role of a normal woman. She cannot withdraw from that mock marriage neither she can remarry. This points towards a misogynist politics in which women are trapped and caged in so called religious walls. Shahraz's text first highlights the issue and later, she questions and challenges it. With Zari Bano's character she demonstrates a cultural violence against women in the form of a cultural practice clad in religious robes and later the remarriage of Zari Bano (the Shehzadi Ibadat) she challenges the deep rooted feudal custom. She accentuates the personality damage when firstly Zari Bano who had to put off her feminist identity and after five years after the death of her father and sister to whom Sikander (her suitor) was married, she was forced by her mother to remarry for the sake of her nephew. Zari bano's bewilderment and refusal to marry to any other man was again a question to her present identity. And when she all of a sudden marries to Sikander for her nephew's sake, she confiscates the access (sexual access) to her. Sikander understands the psychological dilemma that she was in "on becoming totally a pakeeza woman that even a shadow of man frightens you" (Shahraz, 2001, p.145)

Shahraz's displays Zari Bano's fright and horror from company of her husband owing to her internalization of the role of Shahzad I Ibadat in which she had tied a knot with religious scriptures and her faith. Confronting Sikander set her sexuality ablaze. Her body demands her rights but the mind and body comes in conflict. "Zari Bano, don't say No, when your body and heart are saying yes" (Shahraz, 2001, p.489). With a passage of time and with Sikander's effort, Zari Bano successfully came out of the life of celibacy that her feudal father rewarded her for the sake and safety of his lands.

Conclusion

Shahraz's narrative unsnarls the perilous and horrific coalescence of culture and religion and its detrimental impact on women. The narrative presents haq bakshish (marriage to Quran) as a custom that ruined the life of Zari Bano who became a victim twice. Once when she was robbed of her identity of a feminist and a girl brimming with all sensuous desires for her suitor and then again when she became shahzadi ibadat, she was again pushed in to another role of a married woman. By dissolving the marriage to Quran and remarrying the protagonist Shahraz has countered and bashed back to the feudal violence and patriarchal misogynist politics. With the character of Zari Bano, Shahraz has highlighted a socio cultural system coloured in the name of religion essentially favouring men. But with Zari Bano who remained the victim of her family's feudal system, Shahraz abnegates to accept it and in the end she lets the protagonist go for her free will and embrace her sensuality and womanhood back.

Note

1. Haq Bakhshish : is a tradition prevailed in Pakistan especially in rural Sindh, when a girl is married to Quran (the holy book of Muslims), the girl with draws from her right in the father's property and enters in to the life of celibacy and sterility.
2. Shehzadi Ibadat :is a title that is given to the girl married to Quran, who is shunned from all the worldly affairs and pledged to be consecrated herself only for prayers and worship.

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