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The Recounting of Loss, Pain and Gloom in the Poems of Naseem Shafai

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Naseem Shafai (1952), a marvellous, subtle and intense poetess of Kashmir whose literary talent conferred on her Sahitya Akademi award in 2011. She writes in Kashmiri language but because of the chronic appeal in her poems has been translated in varied languages ranging from Telugu, Marati, English to Hindi, Urdu and Tamil. Her two poetry collections *Dereche Machrith* (Open Windows) was published in 1999 and her second collection *Na Thsay Na Aks* (Neither Shadow nor Reflection), published in 2009 won her the award. She belongs to a middle class family, has done masters in Kashmiri language from the University of Kashmir and is currently working at college as teacher of Kashmiri language.

Naseem Shafai renders the untold tales of misery which every woman goes through in a unique fashion. What lends beauty to her literary artifact is her non-mystical portrayal of feminine mental anguish. Her all poems like “waswas” (Perplexity), “Mate Sund Dua” (Prayer of a harebrained) and “Tschandaw” (Search) etc are replete with pain. She is sensitive to the inexpressible agony of her native land and projects the longing for peace through the poems like “Baakh” (Wail) in an extraordinary way. One does smell the blood in the poem! Political turmoil in Kashmir has clogged the paradise with blood and heaped the valley with the corpses of loved ones. She states the woeful tale artistically which leaves the readers full of wretchedness and poignancy.

The paper will attempt to unfold the heart-rending and heart-wrenching tale of Kashmir. It will analyse the wild and blood smeared smiles, metaphors and imagery used by poetess to achieve the effect. Not only this, from the feminist point of view, the paper will try to justify how has the political chaos marginalized the women folk who are left to mourn the loss of self and the loved ones to the brutal clutches of social and political conditions.

As postmodernism puts everything in doubt, it is very important to question and critique the position of woman in such a murky space. Feminism serves as a yard stick to fathom and measure the intense pain of the gentle and fair gender which puts forth the argument in a legitimate way by stating that woman is rendered helpless and reduced to a victim by being persistently hammered into non-entity in a patriarchal system. The paper intends to study the plethora of the chronic mental anguish as rendered by the dweller of the paradise on earth—Naseem Shafai.

Naseem Shafai— a marvellous, subtle and intense poetess of Kashmir, whose literary talent conferred on her Sahitya Akademi award in 2011. She carved her space in the

Kashmiri literary circle by being the first woman to voice her opinion through verses though we had poetesses like Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon and Arinimal who used oral mode of literature. It is interesting to notice, she composed verses during the insurgency years of the 1990s, when Kashmir was going through political turmoil.

In literature, Indian women writing poetry is not a new phenomenon. Eunice de Souza asserts: “Women have been writing poetry in India since about 1000 BC on religious and secular themes, and it is among these rather more distant ancestors that contemporary women writers are likely to find congenial voices and styles.” The accomplishment of their verses is traced meticulously by De Souza. The harmonies of nature is unravelled in their poetry as it is contained with an overwhelming sense of expression. Their poetry is no less than a beautiful bouquet which is decorated with buds and flowers of myriad kinds and colour. It is a fact that the imagination of women is divinely gifted. As Naseem Shafai admits in an interview: “Woman always have a richer store house of vocabulary that they inherit from their mothers and grandmothers. Whenever, I used new words and expressions in my poems, my teacher would ask where I learnt them from. Women also bring to poetry or other genres of literature, a whole new area of expression and vision. These have been my strengths too.” So, women writers deserve applaud for all the emotional involvement in the form of magic and melody which their verses reveal. Such beauty adorned by the mature sensibility, poetic vision and emotional truth is found in the verses of Naseem Shafai labelled as “female crusader”. The psychological depth of her poems is par excellence. She is not a blatant feminist who will emerge as celebrant of the arches and curves of the feminine body but the message in the poems is loud and clear which deal with feminine issues.

Naseem Shafai, writes in Kashmiri because Kashmiri language is a very rich language full of folklores and myths. Over the years, English language has influenced Kashmiri language to a great extent. English language has had such an indelible impression on Kashmiri language that is evident in the bold expression of Kashmiri poetry towards early 20th century. Kashmiri language finds its literary expression in poetry. Only mystic poetry flourished till late 19th century which holds a strong position in Kashmiri literature tradition. The absence of any serious kind of prose or fiction writing in Kashmiri language is its biggest drawback. Kashmiri literature can be an interesting subject for comparative studies in English which can guarantee it a dignified position on literary map of the world. The contemporary poets like Professor Shafi Shoug, Rafeeq Raaz and Naseem Shafai are doing a commendable job by contributing to the further development of the literary and cultural studies of Kashmir.

Naseem Shafai asserts the position of Kashmiri language by stating that “the basis of Kashmiri literature is the poetry of famous poets like Lal Ded, the 14th century mystic poetess; Habba Khatoon of 16th century and Arinimal of the 18th century. They were very strong women who challenged the norms of patriarchy. We have had a rich legacy of women poets but we had nothing on which they had written in their own handwriting. Their works were passed from one generation to other generation orally before they were written in the 20th century. It has been

challenging but many women are coming forward. I was the only one to go to the mushairas in the 1970s. Things are changing now.” On being asked, “Is the Kashmiri language dying as many fear”? She replies, “ I am an optimist. The language has been introduced as a compulsory subject till class VIII. It is optional after that. The best thing about it is that mothers, who are more comfortable with urdu and english have now begun to learn the language to teach their kids” (Interview). She is conscious of the importance of the native language and feels proud to write in the same language because it carries the cultural ethos for her.

The subjects of Naseem Shafai’s poetry are diverse as they cover multiple themes pertaining to female’s life like marriage, divorce, girl-child, motherly love and so on. Her maiden poetic anthology, “Opening the lattice” (1999) was appreciated. When asked in an interview that whether she had to struggle as a poet to make her place? She replies:

We have had a glorious tradition of poets but they all belonged to the oral culture. I was the first woman to start writing poetry in Kashmiri. I started writing, when I was in my early 20s. I got encouragement from my husband, his family and my Kashmiri teacher. However, I cannot say the same about the male poets, who rarely had a word of praise for me. But I continued the struggle about my first anthology of poems— *Dar Camutzrith* (“Open Windows”) came out in 1999. I was able to open the window of opportunities. Now there are a number of women writing in Kashmiri and that makes me happy.

(Interview)

Although, Kashmir has bold contemporary writers like Syeda Afshana, Tarranum Riyaz but the conventional roles assigned to women give her little time to give vent to her literary talent and Naseem Shafai seems to break the ice by jotting down the chiselled thoughts artistically. She confesses that women also bring to poetry or other genres of literature a whole new aroma of experience and vision. It won’t be an exaggeration to say that her poetry is an attempt for Kashmiri women writers to create “a room of their own”.

Naseem Shafai as a woman recounts the sordid tale of a girl in her poem “Time” who is to be wed but feels that she is yet to enjoy her childhood:

O time, how disgusting you are

Not only in your vision, but in your bosom too

I see niggardliness

Stop for a while and do not open the door

Whenever we had an encounter
 You were always in haste
 I am yet to play with my doll
 And have to take leave of my friends

(Trans Majrooh Rashid)

The onslaught of time reminds one of “the unravished bride of time” in which Keats curbs the bridles of time through the invincibility of art. However, Naseem Shafai has not shown any resistance to time in the poem. But succumbed gracefully to it knowing its advances cannot be fought back but are to be accepted even if not welcome. One can draw a parallel between her and Laura Doyle’s *Surrendered Wife*, who admits secret happy marriage is to surrender to husband’s wish and not demand satisfaction in return. The verse, “whenever we had an encounter/ you were always in haste” is contained with the insensitive brutal assault of time which strikes as it likes to strike devoid of the consequences. She sums up the poem beautifully in last two lines, “I am yet to play with my dolls/ And have to take leave of my friends” where in the whole structure of society and its conventional roles assigned to women are unfolded.

The poem establishes the subjection of women not because of their natural inferiority but as a result of male-centered society they cannot avoid living in. The poem can be read against the backdrop of Simon de Beauvoir’s definition of feminism, “One is not born a woman but becomes a woman.” However, contesting the role of a woman in a society where she has to part from her innocence (“I am yet to play with my dolls”) is a social construct. The verse is a manifestation of a woman’s desire where she feels she has suppressed her wishes but she has no option as this is what a society demands of her. This leads to her domestication where in she is conditioned gradually for the future role.

A similar poem which echoes the same pain is “The Solicitude— for the girl child”:

Gently rouse her, calling her in tones soft
 Lest she should with loudness be jarred.
 Full asleep is she, her eyes half-open
 Such beauty in blameless purity makes me afraid
 Verily the smuggling case of my bosom is she
 And the honour of her father’s lilted cap

A daughter she is, a houri of paradise;
Once she leaves home, it will be forever.
When someday in distant parts she dwells
Where what people be like I know not,
Will they awaken her on gentle, mellow sounds,
Or, will they, I misgive, snatch her sleep away.

(Trans G.L Gabroo)

In this poem, the female persona is mother, who is apprehensive as well as concerned about the future of her daughters. She doesnot let her husband to disturb the sleep of their daughter because she doesnot know whether she will get the same peaceful sleep at the other house once she will be wed. The poem is rich in imagery and evokes the same sense of concern on the readers part which all parents go through. “Snatch her sleep away” is a kind of affirmation on the poetess’s part that the future holds no roses for her but the path is thorny and full of bumps.

Kashmir is a conservative society where women are conditioned to silence and cannot afford to speak boldly on themes which are generally considered taboos. Naseem Shafai takes a bold stance by talking on the subject like “divorce” unequivocally:

...Sometimes she would silence herself and
Sometimes she would express herself
Some would pay attention to her,
but
Some, while leaving, would pass a comment.

(Open Windows 36)

The poet seems to suggest that the divorce should not deter a woman from her basic right of living a dignified life. She takes a bold stance when she warns the divorcee woman, not to let others take advantage of her meekness:

Donot repent after receiving this “paper”
I said to her,
And don’t get lost in this confusion...

With hold your tears for people might doubt
Live your life since you are alive.

(Open Windows 36)

The poem above support the argument well that Naseem Shafai fits well in the category of leading feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Barret Browning and Virginia Woolf. She feels the predicament of women and reacts to the dominant patriarchal pattern. Janet Todd asserts:

...a feminist is one who is aware of female problems and is angry or mildly irritated at the female predicament...every woman writer and many men could claim the title.

(Todd 244)

Claiming the feminist title is however not what Shafai aims at. Her approach is more humanist in nature, when her psyche is sensitized by the turbulent political conditions in the valley. A writer is the product of his socio-political conditions and Naseem Shafai cannot escape the influence and captures the loss and gloom in the poem "Bakh" (Wail):

Every evening a queen
With opened doors and windows
Waited for her young princes
Somewhat shy, somewhat frightened
Enquired of her neighbours
Are you children still away?
Mine have forgotten their home
God knows where they have gone
Their food is waiting for them
Suddenly somebody whispered to her
She locked herself behind the doors.
But in the dead of night the ocean broke its bounds
And an unending wail was heard by her neighbours.

‘O, you are too young to die!

Still unmarried, don’t you die.

The poem is intense as it portrays the pain of a mother who has lost her son to the violence that is prevalent in the valley since 1990s. The title of the poem “Baakh” which means to “wail” is appropriate as it echoes with the heart wrenching pain of a mourning mother. The critic, Tanween Kawoosa asserts, “Naseem witnessed the whole catastrophe with horror, as a helpless spectator. She could do nothing but mourn through poetry and that resulted in Baakh.”

What pains Naseem Shafai most is that the women of Kashmir are too shy to voice their concerns. In an interview, she says that women of Kashmir are too shy to air their views or for that matter to express their feelings. Since our women usually don’t express themselves, some one has to speak on their behalf. Kashmiri women need to write and write with a sense of devotion and responsibility. Our women are very capable and gifted but since they are shy by nature, their talent remains hidden. It is again noteworthy, a Kashmiri lady like Naseem Shafai displays the audacity to talk about man and woman relationships:

Darling I am not like you

Nor do I resemble the reflection of your dreams

You have your personality

I do possess my own identity

Leave this egoistic arrogance

You might enjoy a fete of colours

I have grown up differently

And you have to reconcile with it.

Such a bold defiance is marvellous. She deserves applaud for all the intellectual courage she has displayed. In one of her poems, “Mozreyn” (“The female labourer”), she talks courageously about the woman’s being reduced to a sexual prey by a husband:

My inner voice warned

He is not in his usual today

The man-eater is hunting a prey

There, I , opened Shiva’s third eye

Starred at him

Made him to fall from the grace
His entire existence burnt down
Reduced to ashes
He was no more... (He died)

The imagery in the poem is vivid and evokes a sense of horror. The words like “man-eater”, “Prey”, “Ashes”, “Shiva’s third eye” show how words and images – simple, suggestive and highly evocative – can recite the music of the anguish and agony, irritations and humor, observations and reflections with no sign of pretension. This serious and well-considered response to the observed and lived experiences is a drama of daily life poeticized by Naseem Shafai. Not only the technical excellence but also the pain and poignancy endured in suffocation and suppression have found a justifiable outlet in her creative instinct. Sarojini Naidu displays the same courage in a subtle sense in the following verses:

You held a wine cup in your finger tips
Lightly you raised it to indifferent lips
Lightly you drank and flunk away the bowl...
Alas! It was my soul...

(Naidu 200)

Declan Kiberd asserts in “Men and Feminism”:

A true feminism would not assert woman’s independence of men
but would fully remind men of their dependence on women.

(Kiberd 215)

So each line of the verse stands testimony to the fact that Naseem Shafai is assertive about her female identity and is proud of all the grace that comes with her gender which runs counter to the intrepidity and courage of male gender.

Naseem Shafai is not much concerned about the man-woman equality. She does not startle the readers with the bold imagery which defines the counters of female body and does not shock the readers with her exhibition of sensuality like Kamala Das:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.

Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare
Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead of the two?
I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell.
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of sea.

(“The Suicide”)

Kamala Das, undoubtedly emerges as the lioness who gives wild expression to the repressed desires of females in a strict patriarchal order. She is the spokesperson of delicate female consciousness which bears the brunts of harsh ravages of life.

Naseem Shafai spares her readers the embarrassment by keeping the imagery graceful. But there are many instances where a parallel can be drawn between the two. For instance; in her autobiography “My Story” (1977), Kamala Das states:

...Ask me, everybody ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why
He is called a lion...

Kamala Das narrates the traumatic experiences of her life where the insensitivity and ruthlessness of male is labelled akin to the ferociousness of lion. Quite, similarly Naseem Shafai portrays the light of a newly wed girl where the solitude makes her to blurt:

Instantly the ascetic stood up
And threw the ashes in the yard
I had hardly played for a moment
With my little doll.

The “doll” in the above lines stands for innocence which is marred by the “ascetic” who is no less than Kamala Das’s “Lion” who throws ashes in the yard to bury the virgin doll. Though, Majrooh Rashid asserts that, “her feminist sensibility is close to that of Judith Wright; it is far away from the feminist approaches of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath (Tak 114).

Naseem Shafai cannot afford to voice her opinions by protesting against the traditions of the Kashmiri Society like Imitiyaz Dhaker: As in “Purdah-I”, Imitiyaz voices an eloquent criticism against purdah system:

One day they said
She was old enough to learn some Shame. And—
Purdah is a kind of safety.
The cloth fans out against the skin
Much like the earth that falls
On coffins after they put the dead men in.

(Dhaker 19)

The clutches of the society in the form of social norms are strong enough to throttle her. Likewise, the norms that are contained with the protocol that inlaws define and determine the actions of a woman after she is wed are equally frustrating for her. She cannot visit her paternal home, if not allowed and the poem “The Paternal Home” reflects the longing of a woman to visit her parents home:

Yes this path
Leading to my paternal home
Shrouded in the clouds of dust
No riches are so precious for me
As this dust is
I shall lit the threshold of my
Paternal home with my blood
I have not visited them quite a sometime
My blood is frozen in my veins

(Dareh Mutzreth 103)

The way Shafai has given expression to the repression of will in this poem is enlightening. Imitiyaz Dhakar finds “Purdah” as the personification of the suppression of women. In the similar fashion, Naseem Shafai feels clipping the wings of woman which desire to enjoy the flight, equally suffocating. The voice of the poet is compassionate which presses the serious humanistic and feministic concerns. One of the critic, Majrooh Rashid talks about her literary genius:

Naseem is proud of being a woman and doesnot seem to bother about the equality of man and woman. She rather asserts with confidence that man is a victim of his own passion and as such needs woman to control his desires. She is capable of performing the role of a daughter, sister, beloved, wife and above all, a kind mother.

(Majrooh 113)

Even Naseem Shafai is not much concerned to be tagged as a feminist. All she is bothered about is that man and woman are equal and should treat each other equally. In “Adam’s Trap”, the confession is prominent:

Oh, you too got on to this boat
You also strayed at last
Oh, you also got swayed slowly
By this word Smith
Oh, you also followed
Your late mother
Shall you also live by cursed distiny
By your virtue, the world is wonderful
Please realize now
See, the Adam will be worthless
Without you.

(“Adam’s Trap”)

She asserts in the poem that the woman is moulded in such a way that she demands respect and admiration! She states the equality of two genders in her own words, when asked about the nature of her poetry and the feminine element: “My second award-winning book, *Nah Chaien Tshay Na Aks* (*Neither your shadow Nor Reflection*) which was released in 2007, is about women’s empowerment and individuality. In the title poem, I say that a woman is neither a man’s shadow nor his reflection; she has a position of her own and she can do wonders on her own. But it is not irreverent towards men and women being different and unequal. Men are neither more important, nor superior to women. They should at best compliment each other” (Interview). Such a confession labels her as a womanist according to Alice Walker. The perspective of a feminist is narrow as she limits herself to the emancipation of her gender. But a womanist on the other hand, commits herself to the betterment of humanity. As Patricia Hill Collins states:

The colored women feel that women’s cause is one and universal; and that... not till race, colour, sex and condition are seen as accidents; and not the substance of life; not till the universal tittle of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be malienable to all; not till then is woman’s lesson taught woman’s cause won-not the white woman’s nor the black woman’s, not the red woman’s but the cause of every man and of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.

(Collins 37)

Likewise, Naseem Shafai does not narrow down her poetic vision to the emancipation of woman. But she talks about all humanity by standing for the pain of a mother who has lost her son in “Bakh” as discussed before. The pain is universal as the loss is universal. She can be any mother who has lost her loved one. In response to the political turmoil in Kashmir and its serious social repercussions, She says in verses, “ My prayer goes to them. I’ll sing them pslams/ May the new moon ever/ shine in their sky.” She is devoted to the cause of humanity and there in lies her poetic beauty. She expresses concern over the conditioning of the girls which is done just to make her feel vulnerable and almost a cripple. She gives an outburst to this sinister psychological block thus:

She knew
How to look straight into other eyes,
She was, but, taught
In her early life

That those who cast their eyes down
Achieve heights,
She would laugh
And enjoy hilarity
Celebrate the childhood
She was, but, taught
Right from her birth
That a giggle doesnot auger well
She was handed over such a fear
That frightened she would say
“It is the world of satanic influences
Beyond the threshold
Outside the doorsill.”

(“Deception”)

The treatment of woman as a lifeless entity is narrated beautifully by her. Besides, the ill influences of the world she is surrounded with is rendered with excellent poetic precision. Toru Dutt gives the outburst to the same emotions thus:

He for his deeds shall get his due
As I for mine: thus here each soul
Is its own friend if it pursue the right.

(Dutt 67)

Dutt sets the standard for the judgement of the wordly doings where all are rewarded according to their deeds devoid of gender. But Nayantara Sahgal responds in a different way stating:

When I heard someone remark, “We never allow our daughter to go out”, or “ I cannot do that, my husband would not like it”, it sounded very peculiar, alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were property not persons.

(Sahgal 83-89)

The perception of woman varies but there is a point of convergence in all and that is the feeling of alienation which chokes their voices and all we get to hear is a collective cry.

Her poems echo with the subtle reverberations of love also. She knows well the intensity of the emotions and makes the readers to fathom its depths. In the poem, “Haseen Hadisa” (“A Beautiful Accident”), the emotions contained with inhibitions, excitement and so on:

She shuts her eyes; said no, no, no
Felt a burning on blushing face
Dared not looks to meet the looks
Feeling the pain of cupid’s dart
Into the beatings of her hearts

(“Open Windows” 48)

Even the following lines replete with love:

The doors are still engraved with longing for someone
The gaze hanging through window is fixed at the path.
Read my heart, if you can read my face
Write, the reply to queries, if you can rub.

Love emerges as the motivating force in her poems. These poems add to the beauty of the feministic strains in her poems. She is conscious if not assertive about feminine beauty which carries a unique grace as the identity. Like, Kamala Das, She is certainly conscious of the dire psychological need for love and confesses it with a graceful nod. So, for her writing becomes as King Bruce rightly observe: “Writing is a means of creating a place in the world, the use of the personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion” (152). The poems of Naseem Shafai do certainly act as a means of ephiphany for readers. One is awestruck on noticing the child like craving in her poems to be loved but in a real sense of word. She mumbles for love in the following verses:

He neither questioned me
Not caught hold of my collar
I saw, he has no longing now

For childisn Acts.

(“Meeting”)

The language which Naseem Shafai uses in all her poems is ambiguous enough which subjects her to multiple interpretations. The readers get to notice the different shades of her mood which evokes a sense of compassion for the fuss which is present in the life of women to devastate them. What pains her more is the social sanction that is guaranteed on this dehumanizing treatment of women. The tone of utter sincerity which emanates from the emotional truth in her poems is very captivating. She uses the language to voice a kind of revolt against the inhumane treatment with women. Her poems reflect her concern against the degradation of women by making them aware about the social and cultural consciousness of gender. The insidious control of male hegemony and the thrust marginality is reduced to null and void by her creative expression.

Naseem Shafai emerges as the stupendous poet of Kashmir who recounts the pain, loss and the pervading sense of gloom in the lives of women beautifully. She rings the alarm bell for all of them to realize the intensity of pain they have been through and their predicament can only find vent through literary expression. She does not stand for a walk-out on marriage like Ibsen’s Nora but wants the women to realize the strength and integrity of their character. She stands in row with the contemporary male poets by displaying an unexceptional use of poetic idioms in vernacular which oozes with fresh poetic creativity. She addresses the social, political and cultural problems of Kashmir so artistically that one can easily anticipate the prosperous future that her poetry proclaims. Her poetic talent will serve as inspiration for women writers who should now break the silence that has enveloped their experience. Her poetry evokes the courage of women by letting them believe firmly in self with a strong sense of determination:

After a longtime, I have realized my identity
 Comprehend that I have to have a vision
 Well I have to fill my rim with sunshine
 I am the mother Lalla and the Habba Khatoon
 Now the world must not stop me.

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