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Re-Imagining the Man-Woman Relationship: A Feminist Appraisal of Select Poems of Naseem Shafaie

Ashaq Hussain Parray
Department of English,
University of Kashmir,
Hazretbel, Srinagar.

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Abstract:

Since the great biblical '[un]fortunate fall' of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the story of woman, idealized as Eve, has been a story of betrayal, of oppression, and of eternal silence. From the dawn of creation, it is the woman who has had to bear the wrath of male *desire* either in the form of a submissive wife producing children or as Coventry Patmore says "angel in the house" (*Angel in the House*) trying to 'please' the dominant male. This silencing of the half of human population has been justified by the male discourse through various theological, academic (including, history, biology, anthropology, sociology) and political discourses. From time to time women have struggled hard to fight against the oppressive patriarchal laws.

Kashmir has a rich literary tradition of its own. The real founding fathers include the Shitikanth, Lal Ded and Sheikh-ul- Alam. But they belong to the oral tradition of Kashmiri literary tradition. Their poetic output mostly concentrates on the vertical thinking with some exceptions like Sheikh-ul- Alam who writes both of transcendence and of the here and now. Lal Ded is more concerned with the mystical union of herself and the Shiv. Though there have been female voices in the Kashmiri literary tradition they struck us as figures satisfied with the status quo with here and there a cry of protest against the male domination. The coming of Naseem Shafaie on the literary scene marks a real beginning of a new voice in the literary trajectory of Kashmir. This paper attempts to show Naseem Shafaie as a feminist who enters into a dialogue with the literary tradition at her back in order to bring home the point that the relationship between man and woman has been a relation based more on power and dominance than on mutual understanding and love.

Keywords: Desire, Transcendence, Patriarchy, Discourse, Feminist.

The story of women emancipation is a recent phenomenon. Women have had to struggle a lot to get their voice retrieved from the biased pages of history and literature. Though writers have spoken against the *objectification* and exploitation of women from the earliest times, feminism as a systematic political movement is a twentieth century phenomenon when women were included in the Universal Adult Franchise. With the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952), the

real beginning of feminism took place. Woolf argued that women have been denied access to have a room of their own. For Woolf the room suggested the psychological and financial independence of women. Later, Simone De Beauvoir, summarizing the whole discourse formation about women from Aristotle, Aquinas and down to modern times, famously argued that, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being...she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other" [and] "One is not born woman but [one] is made so" thereby saying how the male linguistic discourse has shaped the identity of woman. What she argued was that woman has been treated as the '*Second sex*' and an '*Other*' of the '*essential*' male. The basic assumption behind all strains of feminism is that all discourse formation about women has been male dominated which, to use a term from structuralism, caught in the web of *binaries* has either *demonized* woman as a 'whore' or *romanticized* her as an 'angel'. What feminists argue has been side-lined in this discourse formation about women has been their '*true, actual and objective*' representation. This has led to the essential misunderstanding on the part of male discourse to enter into a meaningful dialogue with women and the literature written by them.

Naseem Shafaie is a new poetic voice in Kashmiri literature. She is the first female poetess from Kashmir who could see her poetic collection published. She is also the first female from Kashmir who won the Sahitya Academic Award in 2011. She is a self-confessed feminist. In an interview with Rahila Sheikh at *Goa Arts and Literary Festival 2012* she said, "To me feminism is when women are respected...I respect men because they are fathers, sons, husbands, and they can be lovers...I am a feminist because [all] I want [is that] women should be respected. They should not be considered as secondary...that is my feminism. I write from that angle" (*interview*). Shafaie has published two poetry collections. *Derche Machrith (Open Windows)* was published in 1999 and *Na Thsay Na Aks (Neither Shadow nor Reflection, in 2009)* which won her The Sahitya Award. *Na Thsay Na Aks* was also among the eight winners of the inaugural Tagore Literature Award in 2009. Her poetry has been translated into English, German, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi and Telugu.

About her first collection "*Open Windows, 1999*" Naseem says "I wanted Kashmiri women to look out of the window... [And] let the outside world have a look of them" (*interview*). Naseem Shafaie is well aware of the literary tradition at her back. She calls Lal Ded as "*The greatest ever Kashmiri Poetess and saint*" and further speaking of her literary tradition she says, "I have [at my back] Habba Khatoon [and] Arnimal" (*interview*). Though Habba Khatoon in her *lole* (love) lyrics sings of the love and the pain of earthly love, she does not emerge as a strong female voice calling for the end of atrocities against women. She pines for the love and writes lyrics which lament the loss of youth, and the ephemeral nature of life. But what sets Naseem Shafaie apart from her predecessors is that her poetry covers the most varied and subtle experiences of life. Her canvass of poetry is large and wide which ranges from singing about the common joys and pains of life, the Kashmiri mother caught in

a conflict zone and her position of being doubly marginalized, first by the conflict and then by the patriarchal world. In this respect she says about the women of Kashmir “Women of the Valley have been the worst victims of the turmoil. They have been subjugated for years and are yet to break free from the shackles to find their own voice. They suffered when insurgency was at its pinnacle and they [still] suffer when it has ebbed”. (*Interview*) So essentially she is a champion of women’s rights and the theme of feminism again and again surfaces in her poetry. Speaking of a mother's concern for her girl child she writes in “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 honor 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*)

This poem very subtly conveys the concern of a mother for her daughter. Words like "gently rouse", "blameless purity" and "a hourie of paradise" speak essentially of the fragile nature of the girl's innocence and the fear of a mother that people (in-laws) might snatch her sleep away.

Speaking of Naseem Shafaie’s poetry Majrooh Rashid, a critic and an Assistant Professor at University of Kashmir says, “Naseem is proud of being a woman and does not 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.” (*Open Windows*) Naseem Shafaie is not a radical feminist like Helene Cixous. Instead she is a feminist in the classical sense of the word. What she essentially propounds is that the relationship between man and woman should not be based on power and domination but on

love and mutual understanding. She is satisfied to be a beloved, a wife, a daughter and a mother and what she wants to convey is that woman be given the dignity and respect which is due to her. She does not reject the human love between male and female as is evident in one of her poems titled '*Shaam Dalith*' (At dusk), where referring to the male lover, she says:

"You assume that you only have the humaneness,
If you still have faith in me, do come at dusk
If your ego allows you, do come at dusk
Do come at dusk to our lane, and you will behold,
The doors are still writ with longing for someone,
The eyes hanging through window are fixed at the path.
Read my heart, if you can read my face,
Write the answer to queries, if you can scratch. (*My Translation*)

Naseem Shafaie in this poem does not reject the male love but calls for the real understanding from the part of the male to understand the inner world of a woman.

In her other poem *Talaak* (Divorce) she boldly calls the Kashmiri 'submissive' woman who has received the divorced paper, not to sigh and cry on receiving a divorce paper but to face it with dignity. In a society which looks on divorced women with a condescending attitude, Shafaie gives them hope of a dignified life. She says to the woman who has received the divorce papers:

"Do not repent after receiving this "paper"
I said to her,
And don't get lost in this confusion...
Withhold your tears for people might doubt ,
Live your life since you are alive
Listen never ever accept the defeat"

(*Open Windows 36*)

Here words like "don't repent", "don't get lost", "withhold your tears", "live your life", "you are alive" and "never ever accept defeat" suggest how Shafaie confers the dignity on woman she deserves.

In the eponymous poem of her second collection called *Be Na chye Ne Aks (I am neither Shadow nor reflection)* Shafaie very deftly enters into a dialogue with the literary tradition at her back to derive home the point of how woman has been marginalized and objectified. This poem is very important in her second collection both in terms of its theme and style. Its style is that of a postmodern poem employing literary allusions to her predecessors like Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon, and Rasul Mir. Referring to her male lover she says, “*I came back like Lalla and rose early to awake you, only then you learnt to speak...*” [And] “*I became Habba Khatoon and took you as my heaven*”. There is also the use of pastiche and irony where she borrows lines verbatim from other poets and re-contextualizes them either to subvert the whole literary tradition which has silenced the voice of female or to raise the question that the phallogocentric world has really failed to understand the female experience. Here is the example of pastiche she borrows from Habba Khatoon:

“O who took you away from me ...?”

I kept fasts in your love, stay for a while,

Full night I recited the thirty chapters of Quran in your Love”.

Though she has done all this for the male lover, yet he seems to be indifferent to her sacrifices and her sufferings. The moment she tries to give expression to what she feels, she is accused of sentimentality and lack of any forbearance:

“The shades you gave to me, you never asked me,

You painted me in varied forms, but I am not in them,

When I started to gush forth the tears of my eyes,

You accused me of lacking patience.”

This poem is also thematically important because here in this poem she posits that essentially men and women are very different and they perceive world differently, so parameters of male world should not be applied to judge the female experience. The purple patch of the poem is when referring to the typical male, the female speaker of the poem says:

“I am not like you, neither a replica of your dream,

you have your own identity, I have an existence of my own

if you care to know, you shall realize a new world

my endurance is different, and you shall comprehend that....”

Here words like “I am not like you”, “neither a replica of your dream”, “you have your own existence” and “I have an existence of my own” suggest Shafaie's idea of man and woman as entirely two different beings who experience world differently and who need to be judged

by their respective parameters. The speaker of the poem goes on to say at what cost she has come to realize that she *too* possesses an *identity* which she can no longer afford to lose.

“After a long time, I have realized my identity
Comprehended 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...”

Naseem Shafaie is well aware about how the theological discourse has been used by the male world to subjugate the world of women. So to counter this she enters into a dialogue with Creation myth and very subtly re-interprets the meaning of creation myth. The dominant narrative on creation myth is that it was Adam from whose rib Eve was created and later on it was Eve who was tempted by the evil serpent which in turn led to the downfall of Adam. So traditionally Eve has been accused of being a ‘temptress’ leading Adam to commit that ‘sin’ which caused their ‘fall’. Countering this male dominant interpretation of creation myth, Naseem Shafaie inverts the whole myth in order to bring home the point that it was actually woman who lend Adam his dignity, who made him worthy of being worshipped and who actually taught him the secret of love and life. She stresses the fact that woman was essential in the development of man's consciousness. As in the poem the female speaker says to the male one:

“You came alone, you would have been forgotten
The angel would have been tired of your worship
None would have known you, had it not been me
I showed you the apple tree in heaven and only then you saw ...”

Shafaie goes on to give vent to the fact that how male tactic works. She speaks through the female speaker that she tried to play every role to ‘please’ the male. She tried to become Habba Khatoon idealized as a woman pining for her lover, yet it could not yield any fruit because there was essential misunderstanding on the male's part. The male took her as an object, a toy, to ‘*use and throw*’. With a heart rending imagery Shafaie speaks how when the female tries to speak out her heart, she is silenced, and not even allowed to sigh by being labelled as “impatient”:

“When I started crying, you said
You don't have patience”.

Speaking of Naseem's poetry Mr. Batab, a member of J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages (JKAACL) has dubbed Naseem Shafaie as “*The feminist Crusader*” and her poetry as “*radically feminist*”. Though this would be an exaggeration and calling Naseem a

'radical' feminist from a theoretical perspective would not be an objective evaluation of her overall poetic oeuvre, there is no doubt that she wants man not to take woman only as a physical entity but as a human being with flesh and soul and a complete whole worthy of respect and dignity. This can be certified from the closing lines of the same poem (*Neither Shadow Nor Reflection*) which are:

“Enter deep into me and trace me for a moment
I am something beyond the body and the beauty
Descend from skies like Krishna and worship me
Oh Rama, become like me, I shall test you out.....”

Expressions like “enter deep into me”, “worship me” suggest that she is not a radical feminist who propounds a radical path for women to take, but these lines exhort men to come to terms with their own selves first as the slaves of passion and after freeing from that try to have a deeper look into the being of woman's self because she is “something beyond the body and the beauty”.

In yet another poem titled “*Maluen*” (*Paternal Home*) she longs for the once harmonial relation with her near and dear ones and highlights the separation and anguish she feels at being away from her original home. She says:

“Though dust laden is the road to paternal home
Yet, nothing is more precious,
The candles of blood shall I lit to its threshold
And swirl it like a tap around a moth,
Lot of time has elapsed since I was there....” (*My translation*)

For the speaker of the poem the paternal home is a symbol of security, love and care. In these lines Naseem very poignantly evokes the pain and the longing of a married woman who pines for the love and harmony she once enjoyed in her paternal home. It highlights how she presently is no longer enjoying all she had once enjoyed at her paternal home.

Conclusion

Though Naseem Shafaie speaks against the oppression of women in a patriarchal world, though she speaks against using women as a ‘commodity’, and against their ‘objectification’, she does not propound a separate path for women to take like radical feminists. She does not lose hope of a male and female relationship based on mutual love and dignity. Instead of taking a radical step she calls on male and exhorts him to first of all conquer his own passion and then try to understand the woman as a human being who is both flesh and soul. This way she re-imagines the whole relationship of male and female based on mutual love, self-respect and dignity.

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