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Religious Patriarchy and Tabish Khair's Feminist Ethos

Sarfaraz Ahmad Farooque

Research Scholar,
Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University of Lucknow,
Uttar Pradesh,
India.

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Abstract:

This paper aims to analyze the novel *Jihadi Jane* authored by Tabish Khair to understand his position as a feminist writer. The author deals with a much-debated topic of the exclusion and denial faced by Muslim women under the patriarchal religious domination. He explores few dominant causes of the continuation of the system of issuing religious decrees by men which are followed by women. He seems to advocate for a need to educate Muslim women to stop conforming to such patriarchal religious codes and formulate their resistance to achieve equality of rights in economic and power structure. This paper is an attempt to examine the instances in the novel to understand Tabish Khair's perspectives on this issue.

Keywords: Gender inequality, Patriarchy, Religious decrees, Women rights, Feminist sensibilities, Exclusions, and Denials.

Tabish Khair's is a modern voice among Muslim writers and he accordingly has a complex and critical perspective towards traditional gender roles. His novels testify to his modern vision and it can be argued that his view of the place of women in Muslim society aligns with the broader Feminist perspective of women's rights and her place in the society. The unequal distribution of power among genders and the advocacy of universal equal rights for all the citizens have been a much-debated topic in the feminist theoretical discourse. The discourse is critical about the advantageous position of the men over women where the former is dominant and in possession of power and enjoys various privileges of which the latter is deprived of. Tabish Khair, in one of his articles "Of Sexism and Male Privileges" published in *The Hindu*, writes that the solution to the problems of gender inequality "is to strengthen the rights of women

globally, to ensure that they get exactly the same space for education, work and living as the men do” which places him as one of the advocates of women rights and the same can be observed in his fictions. He can be comfortably placed along with the mainstream feminist writers because the influence of the feminist discourse is evident in his writings. His novels often capture a multitude of themes among which the suppression of women is one of the dominant discourses. This paper intends to do a textual analysis of Khair's novel *Jihadi Jane* in an attempt to understand his position as a feminist writer.

Patriarchy, Robert Bahlieda quotes Zillah Eisenstein, “is defined to mean a sexual system of power in which the male role is superior in possession of power and economic privilege. Patriarchy is the male hierarchical ordering of society” (16) and this hierarchy is universal. The power is transferred from one generation of patriarchs to another. Women grow up accepting the belief that the male family members have superiority over them. The narrator in the novel *Jihadi Jane* says that her mother “had been lovingly browbeaten by her father, then her husband and then this incomprehensible new country. In the due course, she would be lovingly browbeaten by her son too” (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 4-5). The male family members decide behavioral codes of the female family members and in time it becomes part of the normal consciousness to accept the judgments by the male members of the family. The characters in this novel are from Asian immigrant families in Europe and the patriarchal structure is not much different. They have embraced a Western country as their home however the cultural family hegemonic structure remains the same. It is not being proposed that patriarchy is not a characteristic of western world instead it a much-established part of the Feminist discourse. This cultural male hegemonic structure in the Asian immigrant families is one of the focus areas in Khair's novels.

The acceptance of the behavioral codes by the female members of the family, according to Khair, is one of the reasons for the survival of this gender inequality as an institution. The men feed on to these acceptances as these are the women who make such dominance possible. Khair, in his article “Of Sexism and Male Privileges” writes that these women –

are trophy wives who bat their false eyelashes at the idiotic statements of their husbands, mothers who save the best dishes for their sons, or wives who wear what their husbands decree in the name of religion or culture. (*The Hindu*)

The genesis of this paper lies in this acceptance of male superiority by women who also become a tool of the continuation of this gender inequality. Another way to look at this acceptance is to explore the dependence of women on men to remain in the power equation. Khair is critical of these voiceless characters who not only accept the decrees passed by men in the name of culture, tradition, or religion but also actively support propulsion of the wheels of patriarchy for whatever reasons. The men dictate and the women follow. Jamila wanted to accompany her father to the mosque for Friday prayers like her brother Mohammad did, however, her father would never allow her to tag her along because of religious restrictions. Her father says that “it is against our religion... Women have to pray separately from men” (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 4). The writer is critical about the religious diktats that differentiate between sexes, mostly decreed by men. The “specificity of feminism... rests on the idea of universal and equal citizen rights” (Chaudhuri 83) and Khair, apparently, believes in the idea of equality of gender rights in religious space. If there are restrictions then it should be equal for both sexes. He writes that the universal equality can never be achieved “unless the very same restrictions are applied to men too... you cannot go about in shorts or denim jeans and claim that your women have just ‘chosen’ to wear versions of the hijab” (“Of Sexism and Male Privileges”).

The religious sanctions on women clothing has been a much-debated topic and especially in the case of Islam, it has attracted severe criticism from feminist critics. Khair as an advocate of feminist beliefs writes “I do not think Allah is a fashion designer. He observes people’s hearts, not their clothes” (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 7). This position finds its support in likes of Fatima Seedat, an Islamic feminist scholar, who writes that “a progressive Islam is necessarily a feminist Islam... Islam entails an affirmation of women’s equality with men and that the Qur’an and Prophetic example hold the means to the realization of this equality” (40). On the other hand, we have scholars who argue that the religious guidelines do not only dictates the men and women to dress modestly but also mandates for men to lower their gaze which affirms in the equality of the directives though they differ for men and women. It is important to keep this paper away from going into the depth of the discourse of dressing of women as oppressive and focus on how Khair endorses the need of recognizing the oppressive nature of religious diktats for clothing. He, like any other western feminist, appears to believe Muslim woman as “a supine odalisque, shrinking-violet, virgin and veiled victim” (Kahf 179) who needs to be awakened –

from her slumber to become a newly enlightened and educated advocate of Islamic feminism... [and should recognize] the oppressive nature of her faith and formulates her resistance to Muslim patriarchy. (Seedat 43)

And it is important for us to understand that Tabish Khair's writing vouches for the need to stand against the male dominance over religious directives. The argument is not about a defense of religious directives or an attack on the interpretations of these directives. We are not looking at the moderate, liberal, fundamental, or fundamentalist outlook of the religious directives or practices. We, through the writings of Tabish Khair, are trying to understand the author's perspectives about these issues related to Muslim women. It appears that he is critical of the "absence of concepts for understanding male domination followed from the lack of questioning of male dominance" (Ramazanoglu 175). His character in *Jihadi Jane* conformed and bowed to the religious patriarchal orthodoxy. Jamila says that she practiced the religious directives of clothing completely and she "tried not just to get Aameena to quit smoking but also to start veiling herself" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 7) because she followed the religious diktats of the patriarchs in her family completely. However, later in the novel, she says that she "still keep the scarf on and wear loose clothes to avoid male glances... it makes [her] comfortable" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 7). It helps us to understand that the author is not against wearing headscarf or other types of clothes but he is critical of religious directives of clothing enforced upon women by the patriarchal religious codes governed by men. The choice to wear certain types of clothes should be a matter of free will and Khair is advocating for the need to stand against the religious patriarchal orthodoxies and practice free will.

Tabish Khair's characters are representations of Muslim women with a lackadaisical attitude towards their own rights. Jamila in *Jihadi Jane* lives in London and there is no law which prevents a woman from visiting the graveyard. She and her mother wanted to visit the grave of her father however her brother and his friends prevents them from doing so because women have soft and weak hearts. They weep and lament on the grave of their loved ones which is against Islamic beliefs though they were allowed to be part of the burial and also visit the graves in the past in their native country. Jamila says that "Ammi and I were not allowed to go to the burial – we were women... [She] wanted to visit the grave later on and protested weakly... [she says that] we used to be allowed to go the graveyards back home" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 22).

Jamila's brother and his bearded friends quote various texts and terms the practices of visiting graveyards as "the fossils from jahilliyah" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 169) i.e. the remains from the pre-Islamic times of ignores and "these practices have to stop... It was all wrong in the past, it was not true to the Islamic path" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 22). According to the author these newly enlightened members of the Muslim community are part of the group which insists upon following a very strict version of Islam practiced in the gulf countries particularly in Saudi Arabia. The issue of visitation rights to the graveyard is a recurring motif in Khair's novels, as it is used as a metaphor for the larger absence of Muslim women from certain spaces. He writes about a similar episode in his novel *Night of Happiness*.

The protagonist of the novel *Night of Happiness* is a liberal moderate Muslim whose widowed mother has been visiting the grave of his father all her life is not allowed to visit the graveyard by the new management committee. Their argument against the entry of women in a graveyard is similar to the arguments of Jamila's brother and his bearded friends in *Jihadi Jane*. They say that "women are too weak, too soft-hearted to enter graveyards. They cannot bear it. It is for their good that they are prohibited from entering" (Khair, *Night of Happiness* 106) though Ahmed's mother has been entering the graveyards for longer than most of these new graveyard committee members "have lived on this earth" (Khair, *Night of Happiness* 105). Khair, supposedly, doesn't like the views of these newly enlightened religious Muslims who put sanctions and curtail the rights of Muslim women. He is advocating for a need to change these and, as discussed earlier, Muslim women needs to stand against these patriarchal religious diktats which they had not been willing to fight against because women are not ready to fight for various reasons. Ahmed's argument against the new diktat that prevents a woman from entering into a graveyard raises the eyebrows of a lot of people. They said that Ahmed has "become too big for his boots... [and the] hotheads in the crowd would have roughed him up... [but his mother] pulled him away, literally by sleeve" (Khair, *Night of Happiness* 106) because she feared it to get worse. The reader is told that it is the woman who does not want to get in a confrontation with these religious diktats for one or the other reasons. Ahmed's mother fears that her son will get into troubles with the community however Jamila doesn't confront her brother because of her loyalty to her father. She doesn't protest against these diktats or defies the instructions of her brother because of her loyalty to the religion. She says that –

There was nothing to prevent me. I could have gone without telling anyone... but... I had deep faith in my religion... in those days, it was the religion that had come to me through Abba. I was loyal to my religion because I was loyal to my father, who had suffered much to give us a decent life. (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 22-23)

The ideology of exclusion and denial of the rights of Khair's woman characters through a systematic patriarchal religious system thrives on the acceptance by these characters who either do not protest for fear and consequences or their loyalty towards their family and in some cases, their active participation promotes this ideology. Hejjiye, the woman wing commander of the ISIS, recruits women to become suicide bombers or jihadi brides in *Jihadi Jane* is an example of active participation of women in the cause of their patriarchs. Another example is Umm Layth, an old woman whose husband and two sons fought for ISIS and got killed. She doesn't agree with Ameena's act of hiding the Yazidi teenage boy Sabah who accepted Islam but was always considered as an idolater by Hassan, the jihadi ISIS commander. When Hassan decides to kill Sabah to make him an example for all the idolaters, Ameena argues against it. She says that according to Islam "we cannot kill an innocent person and that too one who claims to be a Muslim" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 180). Hassan's understanding of Islam is very different and he gets furious at Ameena's defense of Sabah. He couldn't tolerate a woman arguing with her husband. He gets up and slaps "her hard, sending her flying back on to the bed, he nose bleeding... [he says] that will teach you to talk back to your husband and honour the germ of doubt" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 181). Ameena hides the boy in her house for a few days, however, he is discovered and she is sentenced to ten lashes in public. Umm Layth considers it to be a weakness of a woman who has the motherly instincts and hence convinces the clerics to judge Ameena's act as an act of "a woman's weakness and not as a matter of faith and doubt—for which the punishment would have been much harsher" (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 186). Ameena becomes an example for every woman who dares to speak against the patriarch's will be subjected to severe punishments.

Halide, one of the new recruits to become jihadi bride or a suicide bomber, is another example of woman who is made an example for others. She teaches at the orphanage cum school run by the woman jihadi commander Hejjiye. She is against teaching girls to become suicide bombers to help the cause of ISIS because, according to her, it is against Islam. She says that –

I was taught to believe that Muslims neither kill themselves nor kill those who are innocent. I was taught that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said that to kill one innocent person is the equivalent of destroying the world. (Khair, *Jihadi Jane* 141)

Halide considers this as indoctrination and brainwashing of the young girls to become suicide bombers that results in the killing of innocent people. She is rebuked, made fun of, and ridiculed by everyone in the orphanage. She was brought to the assembly after breakfast everyday and asked to repent but she would refuse. She was secluded from the rest of the people and put into a cell. She is later sent out of the orphanage for her marriage had been arranged with a jihadi. No one saw Halide after that. Her best friend Jamila could never muster enough courage to ask Hejjiye about Halide ever because she feared for the consequences.

Tabish Khair is critical about the position of women who accept or become part of the patriarchal hegemonic practices for various reasons. He wants the readers to understand that these women need to stand for their own rights regardless of consequences. In his approach, he appears to be an advocate of Islamic feminism and his novels can be “read as an attempt to define and fix Muslim women against the dominant narrative of a patriarchal Islam and in the interests of an inclusive feminist paradigm” (Seedat 37). He explores the position of women in domestic, social, and political settings where the causes of denial of their rights by patriarchal forces are similar and instead of being loyal to their family they should be loyal to their own selves. They should become an independent conscious human being instead of trophy wives wearing the decrees of their husbands on their sleeves or mothers who save the best dishes for their sons.

In his novels one can see a modern feminist sensibility at work in his criticism of the place that women are relegated to in Muslim societies. He is sharply critical of the many exclusions and restrictions that are imposed on women by a traditional notion of the Islamic faith and tries to both criticize and update the attitude towards women. Superficially, it may seem that his women fall into two different groups. Hejjiye and Ameena would seem to fall into opposite camps. But this difference is only on the surface. Both these kinds of women are victims of patriarchy. Some of his women characters like Jamila gradually come to this realization, but others don't. Some like Ameena resist, while others don't. However, they are alike victims. In

Khair's words, Hejjiye is as much a victim as Ameena. The groups of those women who are oppressed by a traditional religious patriarchy and of those who are willing participants in the patriarchal structure are equally fooled by a system that makes them victims and relegates them to a lesser status. For both these women Khair's prescription remains the same: they need to speak up for their own rights, and chart a course that is different from the one that is laid out by the patriarchal system. Their true empowerment depends upon their doing so. It is not so much that Khair is opposed to religious practice per se, it is that he assumes women are given no choice or agency in the matter. In his view, it is an assumption of this agency that would finally have a liberating effect on the women in Muslim society.

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