

WOMEN VS ANDOCENTRISM: AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF QAISRA SHAHRAZ'S NOVEL *THE HOLY WOMAN*

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Abstract

Land and women have been two of man's most important possessions. In a strict patriarchal society women have been subjugated and marginalized for long and their existence has been made valuable and worthless at the same time. What is the role of women in society? What is the role of women in this world? QaisraShahraz in her debut novel *The Holy Woman* has built the plot of the novel around a ritual that takes place in some parts of Pakistan, though not all. According to this ritual in order to safeguard the ancestral property young women are married off to the Quran, and are expected to lead a life of piety in prayer. This is a way to ensure that the land does not go into the hands of outsiders as part of the daughter's inheritance or dowry. In the backdrop of the eco-feminist theory the paper seeks to study the effects of patriarchy and feudal system on the lives of women as portrayed in *The Holy Woman*. Eco-feminism which is a branch of eco-criticism, "analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature" (Bressler, 2003, p. 236). It draws a comparison between the domination of land and the domination of men over women. The marriage of the protagonist ZarriBano to the Quran presents hierarchical, gendered relationships, in which like the land the woman is seen as a fertile resource and the property of man.

Key Words: Eco-feminism, Patriarchy, Androcentric

Introduction

Land represents fertility. For my family and daughter, it spells doom and sterility. 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 aching joys of holding a newborn to her breast (Shahraz, 2001, p. 70).

These lines set the premise of this research article by illustrating the bond between women, and environment as well as the impact of patriarchal dominance over them. Francois d'Eaubonne's term eco-feminism introduced to the worldan association between ecology and women. This paradigm weaves an interconnection between the "domination of women and nature" (qtd. in Twine), the link that holds

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together ecofeminism and the major concern of this study. This study discusses the ecofeminist perspectives of the story of the novel that highlights strong patriarchal and androcentric inclinations of the male characters presented in the novel, who thrive on the subjugation of women; false notions adorned by soaring words; the absolute power which they feel is their so-called divine right to dictate the destinies of those under their authority and control (especially the women); and the impact of their thinking and actions on the overall environment. It examines elements of ecofeminism in order to identify the effects of class, ethnicity, and sexuality on a woman's social status which is quite uncertain in the patriarchal setup as presented in *The Holy Woman*.

Literature Review

Feminists on a global level vocalized their ideas in order to bring to the notice of the world the condition and position of women in relation to society, culture, nature and the world at large. Feminist movements, initially, were an uprising against the patriarchal and misogynistic view point of the writers, critics, philosophers and scientists who were all men. It especially created awareness of women's voice through writing. With the passage of time diversity entered the feminist perspectives and feminism got varied and at times opposing off-shoots. The essentialists view matter and material as the essence of women and argue that gender reflects a difference between men and women psychologically, linguistically and biologically. The constructionists assert that gender is made by culture in history, and of the way the women are made to be by patriarchy. From the economic perspective woman is seen both as a commodity and as labour (domestic and otherwise), from a psychoanalytic perspective, woman is viewed as a prey of men, and according to Freud "gender is socially constructed" (Rivkin, Ryan, 2004, p. 768). This social construct credits hierarchical roles to men and women in a society. In a strictly patriarchal society man is at the apex of hierarchy, and woman is somewhere on the lower posts.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (1975), Susan Griffin (1978) and Carolyn Merchant (1980) have furnished the development of ecofeminism (which is an off shoot of both feminism and ecocriticism) by establishing important historical evidence showing the "Western association of women with nature" (Twine, 2001). Ecofeminist literary

critics scrutinize literature from different cultures and throughout history in order to investigate female perception of nature. Ecocriticism draws the relationship between literature and the physical environment, by asking how nature and women are characterized in literary works. In the same way ecofeminist literary criticism is concerned with the depiction of nature and women in literary works. It emphasizes how traditional ways of thinking often see land as female: e.g. motherland, innocent, and ripe for exploitation. This movement joins environmental, feminist, and spiritual concerns of women (Spretnak, 1990, pp. 5-6). The environmental movement along with environmental crises raised the consciousness of women to the decay of earth; it helped draw a parallel between the devaluation of earth and of women. Ecofeminists highlighted in particular female ways of being and thinking about nature. This brought about awareness among women that their connection with nature or environment is not a false construction of weakness, but rather it is a strong unifying force that made it clear that the violation of women and the earth are elements of the same drama of male control (King, 1990).

Just like feminism there is not just one single definition of ecofeminism, there are several different perspectives from which the issue of women and ecology is seen, discussed and pursued. Nonetheless, in spite of all the differences various forms of ecofeminism converge on one point, "all ecofeminists regard the Western domination of 'women' and 'nature' as conceptually linked and that the processes of inferiorisation have mutually reinforced each other" (Twine, 2001). Ecofeminism thus involves raising consciousness, healing, and a spiritual union with nature. It is the plurality and convergence of the ecofeminist philosophies to a singular stance that is deemed as one of its greatest strengths. Ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration (Miles, 2016).

Ecological feminism (another name used for ecofeminism), lends a commitment to the environment as it provides an understanding of the associations made between women and nature. In particular, this philosophy gives emphasis to the ways both nature and women are treated by the male-centered society. *The Holy Woman* (2001) is one

such novel that presents this connection well, and wonderfully delineates the impact of androcentricism and patriarchy on the lives of women. It shows how their attitude not only puts them in a subordinate position but also ingrains that position of inferiority in their own minds. Through this novel Shahraz has tried to convey that it is not just the men who think they are superior, but the women too (as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters), share the same belief about men. Sadly, women think of themselves as "a mere worthless woman" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 71). This is simply because the system conditions the society in this fashion and reinforces this notion over and over again, till it becomes part of their worldview. Shahraz's (2001) portrayal of the male and female characters in the novel projects this image of the gender roles in a patriarchal society. This in turn addresses the ecofeminist issues through the events in the life of ZarriBano and her mother Shahzada.

Ecofeminism in *The Holy Woman*

This fascinating family drama is all about love, betrayal and conflicts between cherished old traditions and the not-so-favoured modern ways of life. ZarriBano, the charming and charismatic daughter of a feudal landowner, falls in love with and wants to marry a business tycoon, Sikander. Her father, Habib, prohibits her marriage to Sikandar. Soon after, his only son, Jafar, is killed in an accident and Habib then decides to make Zarri his heiress: he revives the ancient tradition of their clan according to which an heiress must lead a celibate life dedicated to prayer and worship. Zarri is made to submit to her father's dictates and becomes the holy woman for her clan.

Most women characters in this novel are well-to-do educated women (with a feudal background) who at certain points in time are at a liberty to make their own choices and decisions, but at all times they need the seal of male approval and endorsement. This paper focuses on the events directly linked with the life of the heroine of the novel ZarriBano and her family. It revolves around her dreams, desires and ambitions and how they are crushed under the dictates of her father. The plot of the novel very eloquently delineates the ecofeminist traits of the story.

At the onset of the novel the protagonist is shown to be a very confident young woman who claims to be a "feminist" (p. 16), and does

not like to hear of words like "nets & webs... angled at, caught and trapped..." (p. 16), which go against her modern feminist morals, but all her university education, modernity, assertiveness, and feminism fall short in front of her father's word, and the so-called family tradition of their clan, whereby even though she inherits her ancestral property and wealth; becomes an heiress due to her brother's tragic and untimely death, she is not the one who gets to decide her fate. Her fate is painted by the male members of her family (her father and grandfather), and as such ZarriBano is "crushed against the wall of patriarchal tyranny" (p. 74). The novel depicts a scenario where the men see themselves as gods and deciders of other people's fates. The women too seem to submit to this notion of the men-folk and award them the place of gods and creators: "...men are the true creators in our culture ... They mould our lives and our destinies according to their whims and desires" (p. 87).

The most crucial issue raised in this novel is the act of marriage of young women to Quran. It is a clear violation of women's rights and basic human rights to ensure that the ancestral wealth and land do not fall into the hands of outsiders (people not of the same family or clan). Objectively speaking, it is not objectionable if someone, of their own free will, decides to lead a celibate life and dedicate it to religion, prayer and worship, but to force someone to live in a state where they have to give up all pleasures and comforts of a normal life; where they do not have the opportunity to make a life for themselves; have a life partner; have children; where they cannot socialize of their own free will etc. is simply unnatural, cruel and immoral. Shahraz's ecofeminist stance in the novel questions and rejects patriarchal paradigms held in the past and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. The novel echoes patriarchal practices and discourse that deal with ecology and women by depicting traditional male-centered approaches and mindsets that involve exploitation of and supremacy over women.

The Holy Woman is a work of fiction but the practice of marriage to the Holy book is not fiction. This is not a very widespread practice in Pakistan, but none-the-less it exists and QaisraShahraz has bravely taken up this issue to be the central theme of her debut novel. Raising such issues are considered a taboo in Pakistan and for a woman writer to address this malpractice in a work of fiction is commendable. Observing

this tyrannical practice from the ecofeminist perspective reveals the dominance of men, the importance they give to their "honour/ izzat", and the value of their land and wealth. Nothing else holds much value in front of their honour, possessions (women, wealth and land), and their power to control.

Well, now that I have no son, who is going to be my heir, Shahzada? To whom am I going to bequeath all this land? I am not going to hand it over to some stranger who just happens to marry my daughter. This is *our* land, accumulated and paid for by the sweat and toil of my forefathers, down the centuries by different generations. Tell me what would you do in my position? (p. 66).

Lofty words and notions – 'honour/ izzat', 'tradition', 'our', 'Shazadi Ibadat' — help the men craft their stance which brooks no argument. "Alongside our land, our wives and daughters, our izzat—our honour—is the most precious thing in our lives. We never compromise on the issue of our women and our izzat!" (p. 37).

Furthermore, the linguistic patterns of the male characters of the novel disclose the import of subjectivity in their life. The excessive use of 'I' and 'my' in the dialogues of Habib demonstrates the value he gives to his subjectivity and his pride over his authority and possession. It also reflects and reinforces for the readers that he is the master and lord over his home and lands: "I am the head of the family and I will decide what is good for my Zarri Bano" (p. 23). Then again,

...I have decided! ... I have lost a son, and I am not going to lose my inheritance to a complete stranger. I want you to support me in this...If you don't do it, our ancient traditions will outweigh your opposition, so you had better get used to the idea." (p. 67)

Such claims and declarations raise the question, 'What is a woman to do when faced with such a situation?' She is told that her support is important and holds value (as it boosts the male ego, and makes him look strong and all powerful to have his womenfolk on his side), but even if this support is not given, it will not make a difference because the woman's stance will be overruled by the "ancient tradition"(p. 67). It only goes on to prove that men – Habib or his father Siraj Din – are masters and lords, and only their dictates hold value.

Furthermore, it portrays that all others are subordinate to them, especially women. Shahzada implores her husband Habib time and again that ZarriBano should be allowed to marry Sikandar, but her pleas fall upon deaf ears. This is the woman who is faced with the dilemma whether to mourn for her son Jafar's death or to mourn for her daughter's fate which she can foresee even in the throes of grief of losing her only and beloved son, she is "shackled to the chains of ... male dominion, ...ressmeh,...traditions"(p. 71). She is made to feel low, worthless and like a "puppet"(p. 71) when her husband disregards their decades of marital relationship and threatens her with a divorce if she encouraged their daughter to marry Sikandar thus reducing her to the status of the "lowest of the low"(p. 75) .

I am just a puppet, a mere worthless woman to do your bidding. You and your father are the puppeteers, Habib you hold my daughter's fate in your hands. What choice do I have? I can only swing and dangle along in whichever direction you pull and manoeuvre my strings ... Allah has only blessed you with any common sense (p. 71).

These words by Shahzada reflect the inferiorization of women, and the notion of superiority men feel because they think they can reason and have more common sense than women. Shahzada's declaration examines the effects of gender categories in order to exhibit the conduct in which social norms wield unjust dominance over women and nature. Decisions such as the one made by Habib to marry off his daughter to the Quran affect multiple lives. Where there are strong bonds between people who are related to each other, not just one life is destroyed by such rash and senseless and cruel decisions, but all those attached to or related are also adversely affected. This decision proves an eye-opener for all the women in the family. ZarriBano tells her father that she is not cut out to be a "nun" (p. 79), the very confident young woman who had once declared "I am a free woman. I will decide..." (p. 16). Now she feels herself "fated to be a loser in this game of male power-play" (p. 74).

The novel provokes the mind to think of those who have had to live through this situation in real life. It is hard to imagine how those women, who are confined to the status of a Holy Woman, live a life confined to prayer and worship, especially when their heart is not in it.

These young women are denied their right to a normal marriage (to a human being); to experience intimacy with any man; to bear children; to laugh and play; to be who they want to be. In this way there are hundreds and thousands of women who are made to feel that their opinion counts for nothing, that they do not have the right to make and take decisions on their own, that whatever they think or say is nonsense, that they are weak, that they are loved only till they remain submissive and apologetic, that they are nothing more than a piece of property, that their life and their body and their mind is not their own, but belongs to some man—father, brother, husband, son, keeper—who has the divine right to decide for them and about them. Realistically speaking there are some strong matriarchal societies and sub-societies as well, but on a global scenario patriarchal and androcentric societies thrive out in the open and in greater number. And thus Qaisra Shahraz pens down the dominant patriarchal practices that influence the lives of womenfolk in *The Holy Woman*.

She portrays such mind sets, in the characters of Habib and Siraj Din, which staunchly uphold and breed male domination. Generation after generation from father to son, and from mother to daughter the same teaching is passed on. More importance and power is handed over to the male members of the family and the female members are taught to be proper, and submissive even apologetic, and weak, and less important or unimportant for that matter. As mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, women are taught that men have more value, more power, and more authority. These are gender assigned positions that society bestows upon men and women. It is the same lesson that is being taught for thousands of years. It is the same lesson which the female characters in this novel are reminded of with a rude awakening. It is the same lesson which is ingrained in ZarriBano's mind when she says to Sikandar, "Don't be fooled by the modern image that confronts you. I may look the part, but on the inside I am very much a product of my clan...I think and behave in a manner consistent with my clan's traditions. I respect and follow our centuries-old traditions" (p. 50).

Furthermore, sacrifice, compromise, and obedience are other names for these lessons that are taught to the girls from their cradles. In agreeing to become her family's 'Holy Woman' ZarriBano sacrifices her life's happiness, and identity, displaying her obedience to her father. She

is made to accept defeat though most “unwillingly” (p. 87), and made to accept her role as a “puppet”. ZarriBano's dismay at her father's betrayal is clearly laid out when she says to her mother, “My father made me believe that he would “sell the world for me” when in fact he eventually decided to “sell” me to his male whim and ancient tradition” (p. 87). At one time she had proudly boasted her father's claim in front of Sikandar, but at this point her shattered beliefs tell the story of her feelings of worthlessness. Her ultimate expression of defeat is when she declares that being a feminist she will never be able to forgive herself for succumbing to this coercion: “the ironies of all ironies for which I can never forgive myself, is that it has happened to me—a feminist” (p. 87).

Shahzada compromises by giving in to her husband's orders, by abiding most unwillingly to her husband's dictates. She feared for her daughter's ordeal yet she knew that she would have to stand by her husband and endorse his decisions. She says to Habib, “I will never forgive you, but I'll do my best to support you in everything, as it is my duty” (p. 71).

Another point of consideration is that in patriarchal societies marriages also entail a new identity for a woman. Her identity as a daughter which is attached to her father's name is changed to that of her husband's name. She hardly ever has a say in whether she wants to retain her name or identity as she pleases. It is mostly the woman who has to go to her husband's house, adopt his name, adapt to the norms of his household, bear his children, obey him. He is the identity for her. The woman does not have an identity of her own, and in most cases the woman either does not know this or does not mind it, and mostly also feels proud to carry her father's or husband's name, because she has never been taught otherwise; woman is duty bound because she is his. The change from ZarriBano to "ShahazadiIbadat" (p 67) is his choice, his demand, and his command which must be obeyed.

Conclusion

The novel is replete with many more such heart wrenching incidents, and examples. By examining *The Holy Woman* from an ecofeminist perspective it becomes evident that Shahraz projects that though the woman is valuable for man yet she is made to feel worthless, and ineffectual. A man's honour is attached to his women folk but he does not

himself honour them; they are reduced to the status of mere possessions, like the land, and of the two land is given more value. Men like to control, to be the rulers of their households and property, and if they desire something then destruction and shattering of women's personalities, and lives hold no consequence for them. To round off the discussion I would like to say that any girl child who is growing up in a society where these practices of male dominance and female inferiorisation occur on a daily basis, will take her place in that very same society just as did her predecessors, unless she is made aware that she has a place and an identity of her own, no less superior to that of the other sex. In this regard Shahraz has successfully incorporated ecofeminist elements by displaying the interrelation between the members of the Din family and establishing the hierarchic androcentric and patriarchal set up and how it shapes and moulds the lives of the womenfolk of the family. This article has thus examined these elements of ecofeminism in order to recognize the very real effects of class, ethnicity, and sexuality on a woman's social status which is quite uncertain in the patriarchal setup as portrayed in *The Holy Woman*.

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