

The Tragedy of Ignorance and Tyranny: A Feminist Analysis of Dr Humera Ishfaq's

کتبوں کے درمیان (Among the Gravestones)

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Abstract:

The article in hand is a feminist analysis of Dr Humera Ishfaq's کتبوں کے درمیان (Among the Gravestones). Feminism as a literary theory helps researchers analyse literary works to explore inequality, power relationships, unspoken rules, and the unfathomable forces that control women in various cultures. Analysis of the mentioned short story aims at glancing into a social graveyard that is full of gravestones wailing elegiacally on brutality against women. Women's insubordination and boldness are associated with sexuality and resultantly they are treated harshly and in an authoritarian way. The brutal handling of such conditions in extreme cases may end up with a woman's murder. The textual analysis of the short story reveals various motives behind femicide in patriarchal societies. Four tragic events, narrated in the short story and the characters are symbolic in the sense that each character reveals a motif of honour killing which is one of the bleeding spots of our society.

Keywords:

Dr Humera Ishfaq, Gravestones, Women, Femicide, Patriarchal, Honor Killing, Violence, Hum Zaad, Symbolism, Imam Bibi, Zeno

To read **Dr Humera Ishfaq's** *Katboon Ke Dermian* (Among the Gravestones) is to look into, at times, ignored but tragic matters of gender-based oppression and in extreme cases honour killing. The short story is like opening up graves and performing a social post-mortem of the overlooked brutality unleashed against helpless women. Despite debates and discussions on the issue of social equality; patriarchy is a widely prevalent practice. Patriarchy has various impacts on women; e.g. nominal rights, less access to financial means, limited participation in social life and powerlessness in the family and social matters. Even "in emancipated societies—if they are considered to be "equals," they are still measured against a male norm"(Schrupp v). And when it comes to comparison and measurement an environment of competition is most likely to start up. The Realistic Group Conflict Theory proposes that prejudice comes up from competition. "Competition is an important source of frustration that can fuel prejudice" (Myers 326). If the competition is based on social

domination, the fear of losing power and control induces more desire to hold control amongst the competitors. Such a condition may result in violence and violence further weakens those who are already weak physically, financially and socially. The understudy short story is a lucid picture of oppression and violence against women; through the pen of a woman writer.

The story opens uniquely in the sense that the very first sentence is a warning note that comes from the *Hum Zaad*: ہم زاد (ethereal self or the second self) that is not a physical being. Rather it may be the astral body or doppelganger of the 1st-person singular narrator. However, the second self of the narrator has been addressed in 3rd person. Research conducted on the subject of self-talking found that non-first-person language enhances self-control:

Self-talk is a ubiquitous human phenomenon. We all have an internal monologue that we engage in from time to time...small shifts in the language people use to refer to the self as they engage in this process consequentially influences their ability to regulate their thoughts (Kross, Bruehlman-Senecal, Park, Burson, Dougherty, Shablack, Bremner & Moser 321).

But further wading within the story reveals that the narrator's talking to the other self was not an attempt to maintain self-control, nor to avoid anxiety but it was more serious and pathetic.

The beginning of the story is abrupt in the sense that its plot does not follow the traditional sequence of exposition, climax and denouement. The very first sentence sets the tone of the story and that is the establishment of intimidation and control.

ویران راستہ میرے قدموں سے لپٹ گیا تھا۔۔۔ میرے ہم زاد نے مجھے سمجھانے کے انداز میں کہا: "دیکھو! میں نے اس شہر کے بارے میں عجیب عجیب باتیں سن رکھی ہیں، تم اس طرف مت جاؤ" (Ishfaq 63)

Trans: The desolate trail was holding my feet...my inner voice tried to warn me in the words; "look! I have been hearing weird things about this city and you should not go there"(Ishfaq 63).

The word; ہم زاد (*Hum Zaad*) is an equivalent of the second self or alter ego. In this way, the technique may be compared to the use of soliloquy and monologue. However, in soliloquy "a character appears to be thinking out loud" (Quinn 393). Keeping in view the definition of soliloquy the current story instead of soliloquy seems closer to Interior Monologue ie; "The technique of recording the continuum of impressions, thoughts and

impulses either prompted by conscious experience or arising from the well of the subconscious” (Cuddon 364). Societies tend to control their members and gain conformity. Societies have various ways of controlling their members, social norms are the set standards that every member of the society is expected to follow. Talcott Parsons was of the opinion that most people willingly conform to societal standards but Marxists see social control as an engineered way to control the people. Social control may be formal, based on laws devised by the states and it may also be informal through norms and values but sometimes, the norms become extreme social prohibitions and are considered to be taboos. There may also be informal sanctions like shame and sarcasm to keep people conforming. Keeping women under patriarchal control is a norm within some societies and gender-based violence and honour killing are practised in strong patriarchal setups. In such societies, in the name of prestige and honour women have to suffer a lot and raising a voice against such practices is culturally prohibited which worsens the situation more. Consequently, writers like **Dr Humera Ishfaq** who intend to address such problems have to make use of symbolic character and sometimes even have to satisfy their consciousness by merely talking to the inner self. Honour killing and suppressing victim women’s voices is a subject that cannot be discussed more freely. To enhance the severity of the subject, the writer in the story makes use of an ethereal character i.e. the *Hum Zaad*. A *Hum Zaad* is the mythical invisible body, born with every human being. In most cases, we are supposed to have no clue of such ethereal bodies living as our parallel but at times humans may have the ability to talk to them. Talking to the *Hum Zaad* is like talking to one’s self that is very private and not traceable by others, especially if society is not ready to let others discuss a taboo topic talking to the *Hum Zaad* is the only choice. “Augustine proposes that the best way to do serious thinking is not by talking to others but by talking to one’s self” (Stock 05). The use of such a technique reflects the seriousness of the topic and the social pressure on women and those who want to address these problems.

After entering the city ‘known for weird things’, the narrator comes across faceless women (بے چہرہ عورتیں), all in white clothes (سفید لباس زیب تن کیے ہوئے) and walking an identical gait (p.64). The description of the faceless women with the same dress and identical gait is again symbolic that gives the impression that almost all the women in patriarchal societies all over the world, have to face similar treatment and they do not have their own identities. The expression of ‘faceless’ has been used by an African writer Amma Darko as the title of her

feminist novel *Faceless*. The novel also depicts the pathetic condition of women in Ghanaian society. “The novel (Faceless) can be analyzed using any approach such as sociological approach, realistic approach, formalism, Marxist approach and feministic approach. However, the feministic approach is most appropriate as the work centres mainly on issues pertaining to women” (Ozoh 02). The subject matter and the expression of *Faceless* indicate that women almost all over the world have similar problems and diminished identities.

Valerie Hudson of Texas A&M University and Donna Lee Bowen and Perpetua Lynne Nielsen of Brigham Young University constructed a scale of 0 to 16 and ranked 176 countries, measuring based on unequal treatment of women (they called it; ‘patrilineal/fraternal syndrome’). The researchers found that “120 countries remain to some extent subject to this syndrome” (Habib). The apprehensive environment is so intense that it directly hits the inner self of the onlooker, resultantly; the panic-stricken and stunned *Hum Zaad* (the other self of the narrator) could not but flee, leaving the narrator further forlorn. Instantly, the narrator notices that a gravedigger is present there and also a shop to sell funeral clothes. The setting of the story makes it clear that the narrator was passing through a graveyard, the narrator expresses the fear in the following word:

"خوف نے میرے اندر سناٹے کا بیج بویا تھا جس کا بوجھ اٹھانے میں اس شہر کی ویران گلیوں میں پھر رہی تھی۔ عجیب شہر تھا جس میں گلیوں میں گلیاں اور گھروں سے گھر جڑے ہوئے تھے، دروازے مقفل اور زندگی موت پر نوحہ کناں تھی۔ گھروں پر نام کی تختیوں پر عورتوں کے نام درج تھے۔ یہ بات مجھے حیرت میں ڈال رہی تھی کیونکہ عموماً گھر مر دکانام سے جانا جاتا ہے۔ عورت تو بے شناخت پیدا ہوتی ہے" (Ishfaq 64)

Translation: Fear had stunned me and burdened with it I was drifting through the desolated alleys of that city. It was a strange city where streets were intermingled and the houses were so contiguous. The doors were locked and ‘Life’ was crying out dolefully. The plates on the houses were bearing the names of women which surprised me as houses customarily depict male names because women have no identity (Ishfaq 64).

Sooner it is revealed that the houses were in fact graves and the nameplates were the headstones bearing the name of the buried women. The use of the word, ‘home’ and later finding it to be grave; speaks of domestic violence, especially against women. What seems peaceful and protected may sometimes prove to be the symbol of restriction and oppression. Schrupp narrates this condition in the word: “People are only now beginning to realize that homes are actively dangerous places for many women, and in no sense sanctuaries, as we commonly imagined” (Schrupp 57). The same fact was further elaborated in another study mentioning; “Worldwide, 40–70 % of females murder by

their intimate partner. According to WHO multicountry study, domestic violence ranged from 15 % in Japan to 71 % in rural Ethiopia” (Semahegn & Mengistie). Semahegn and Mengistie’s study shows that there is not a single country in the world that can be considered hundred per cent free of violence against women.

In the graveyard, the writer could recognize three names written on the headstones. The first one is Samina who had been a friend of the narrator. The narrator had migrated with her father to a nearby city and this migration was because of ‘an unknown fear’; obviously, the fear that the local culture would not allow the narrator’s father to bring up her in a female-friendly environment. Cultures have the power to compel individuals to behave in a way acceptable in a specific culture. Peter Crabb and Dawn Bielawski found that Gender socialization gives girls “roots” and boys “wings.” (Myers 177). Cultures reprimand those who tend to avoid conformity. The fear of disapproval felt by the nonconformists makes them flee from the situation and that was the way adopted by Samina’s father. A study conducted by Andre Pitting (University of California), Alexandra R. Schulz and Michelle G. Craske (University of California) Georg W. Alpers (University of Mannheim) researched and found that humans for their safety try to avoid whatever is associated with the aversive experience. “In complex situations, the selection of adaptive behaviour is the key to human survival and well-being. Adaptive behaviour protects the individual from harm but also enables it to obtain rewards e.g., food, social contact” (Pitting, Schulz, Craske and Alpers 314). Samina’s father had to face social pressure because he was intending to send Samina to college and avoidance is a natural reaction if it can prevent harm. Samina’s family migrated for their safety but the act was neither forgotten nor tolerated by the cultural set-up in which they were living. Samina passed the Higher Secondary School level at college but because of her father’s death and to support her old mother she decided to start a job. The grudge that had been sown at the time of her decision to attend the college sprouted more forcefully when she found a job. Most working women have to face such restrictions and resistance if they are career oriented. “It is clear that the alternatives available to workingwomen are highly constrained by the existing structural context, a context that includes the prevailing ideology about women as workers, resistance from employers and working men, and a conservative national government” (Blum 131). But resistance only is not the limit for working women, in some cultures a woman crossing the threshold of the house for a job is like crossing the social boundary which is in no way tolerable. The same was the crime

committed by Samina, consequently, she was killed and a living human was turned into a gravestone.

Until the early 20th century, women had no access to university education. “Women were first allowed to go to university in the early 20th century, having both a career and a family. Even, in well-developed countries, despite having access to education and women have to face inequality in various ways. “Within the U.S. culture, it is considered natural and normal for a woman to have lower income and lesser occupational prestige than her male partner” (Anderson 658). In certain countries, when fascist parties gained power the feminist movement was banned” (Europe). The condition cited speaks of the women in the First World countries. The situation in third-world countries like Pakistan is even worse. The grimness of the situation could be surmised as one of the victims’ fathers had to face social pressure when he sent her daughter Samina to college. Attending an educational institute, to a bit extent, could be tolerated because most girls attend colleges which are established only for women. However, in a workplace, gender-based segregation is not possible which makes it hard to accept working women in some societies. The character of Samina is an example, who had to face wild justice for defying the cultural expectation. The societies that react in such violent ways are not merely the eastern and Muslim rather patriarchal structures exist all over the world and such structures try to establish power structures to maintain control over women. A researcher Anjana Raza pointed out the evidence of such structures even in England. Anjana Raza writes;

The UK is just another country that has been added to a long list of regions where honour killings take place. Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Australia have all maintained a patriarchal structure that sanctions control over women’s bodies and sexuality in a bid to maintain power structures. Honour killing is one of the older tribal customs that has existed since pre-Islamic times (Raza 89).

Gender-based discrimination in England was also noted by Annie Cossins. She wrote the book, *Female criminality: Infanticide, moral panics, and the female body*. Chelsea Neumann and others while writing a review on her book mentioned that the book describes moral panic, baby-farming, and infanticide in 19th-century Victorian Britain. The book is another documented proof of the existence of gender-based inequality in the countries of the First World.

Going out for a job is insupportable in some cultures but the grimness touches the worst situation when women cannot be expected and accepted to go out of the home just for routine chores. The second character recognized as Imam Bibi was the victim of that brutality. She went to the city only to buy clothes for her daughters and was resultantly killed by those whose honour had been dishonoured when a woman went from the village to the nearby city for shopping. The daughter of Imam Bibi is the third victim character of honour killing and social injustice. She was Zeno; a friend of the narrator of the story. This character unmasks three types of injustice in patriarchal societies. The narrator says:

زینو سے ایک وڈیرے کی بیٹے نے زبردستی نکاح کر لیا تھا۔۔۔ وڈیرے کی بیٹی پر وٹے سے کی پاداش میں سوتن آئی تو زینو کو مجرم جان کر کم سے کم جو سزا تجویز کی گئی وہ موت تھی۔

زینو کا باپ تو زندہ تھا؟

عورت کا انہوں نے بھی آپسی فیصلوں میں طے ہو جاتا ہے، کبھی زمین کے بدلے اور کبھی ایک اور معصوم عورت کو وٹنی قرار دے کر (Ishfaq 67)

Translation: As a result of forcible wedlock Zeno became the wife of feudal's son...a co-wife of the feudal's daughter, the result of another forced marriage became the cause of Zeno's murder.

Zeno's father was alive?

The blood-money for such deaths is agreed upon and decided by men that is often a patch of land or sometimes another innocent woman is enough for that (Ishfaq 67).

The writer through the character of Zeno has exposed the evils of; Forced marriage, the Exchange of girls in the name of marriage, and Vani (*Vani* is a form of arranged or forced child marriage, and the result of punishment decided by a council of tribal elders called *jirga*).

Firstly, Zeno was forced into wedlock by a feudal man. In some cultures, it is a common practice that women do not have the right to decide the matters of their marriage and partner. The elder males in the family have decisive powers which cannot be challenged. Such marriages sometimes also result because of the class systems in society. The feudal have unlimited power to control their subjects either men or women. If such feudal wishes to get a woman of their subjects; the poor people do not dare to resist it and as a result of the forced marriage the feudal would get the desired woman. Violation of gender equality and forced marriage is considered a human-right abuse by the UNO. The practice of forced marriage is not

limited to any specific area of the world it had been practised almost in every region. For example, Sweden banned forced marriages in 1734. “The Marriage Act of 1734 banned forced marriages and equal inheritance rights for men and women were formalized” (Rotering 73). In China forced marriages were banned in 1980. “THE first Marriage Law was issued on May 1st, 1950 soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Chinese women were henceforth liberated from the feudal marriage system” (China Today). Morocco an African country banned forced marriages in 2018. “A new law in Morocco criminalising violence against women goes into effect on Wednesday, in what critics say is merely a first step in the right direction. Approved by parliament in February the new law bans forced marriages” (MEWC). The pieces of evidence of forced marriages in Europe, Asia and Africa make it a universal theme. Although, internationally, violence against women is discouraged and not acceptable, however, various attempts to ban it indicate its prevalence over the globe. The subject matter of the story is cosmopolitan i.e. “...such writing is concerned with global/universal themes and issues (political, social and otherwise) and also with the attitudes and language involved in any discourse on such themes and issues” (Cuddon 160). And it makes **Dr Humera Ishfaq’s** short story a Cosmopolitan Writing.

Secondly, the writer, through the character of Zeno points out the evil of exchanging girls in the name of marriage. Sometimes a sister or daughter is forcibly married to another man in exchange for that man’s sister or daughter. The men decide the destiny of women just to get themselves married. The women exchanged in this way are often in a very miserable condition because they cannot resist the cruelties and are even unable to use the option of divorce as their brother or father is married to a woman of her husband’s family. Such women have no respectable status within the families. In such cases, the women are treated like a surety bond rather than a living human and they may also have co-wives. The surety bonds may be abolished for other preferred issues.

Thirdly, through the character of Zeno, the narrator has pointed to ‘Vani’ also called ‘Swara’. Vani or Swara is a cultural practice of giving females as the object of compensation to settle down clashes. Researchers Anwar Hashmi and Rifat Mushtaq Koukab have traced the origin of Vani which dates back about 400 years.

This cruel unIslamic inhuman tradition started almost 400 years ago when two 'Pathan' tribes of Mianwali fought a bloody war against each other. During this bloody period round, about 800 people were murdered. At that time NAWAB OF TANK tried to resolve this tension. He called the "GIRGA" who decided that girls are given as QISAS. They considered it the only way to resolve this dispute and both families turned into a Biradri (Hashmi & Koukab).

Even after 400 years, this practice has not been abandoned fully it is unlawful in Pakistan but there are instances in remote rural areas and tribal systems where people may end clashes in this way. Declan Walsh the Guardian's correspondent for Pakistan and Afghanistan reported, "It started with a dead dog, escalated into a tit-for-tat tribal war, and has now reached a grotesque climax with the exchange of 15 child brides" (Walsh). The mentioned event is a lot enough to surmise the grimness of the issue, having its roots deeper, in cultures and tribal systems, makes it harder to uproot absolutely.

The killing of women and male domination in society is not limited to those females who come out of their homes for jobs and other purposes and atrocities do not end up with forced marriages and using females as objects of compensation, the gruesomeness further extends to female selective abortion. Sex selection is the result of the desire to control the gender of the offspring. Sex selection has become a common option to have a child of the desired gender. The use of the process of FSA has appeared as an available option in societies where; son-preference originates from the marginalized women's status, where the prenatal diagnosis of the unborn babies' sex is possible and where giving birth to babies is limited by law. "Biologically the sex ratio at birth is 95 girls to 100 boys" (Seager 42). Despite the higher mortality rate in boys, the sex ratio has been distorted especially in countries where culturally or on other basis couples tend to opt for the male baby. The problem is more severe in India and China. Especially in China, the one-child policy disturbed the sex ratio at birth (SRB). It was found that the "SRB changed from 106 in 1979, to 111 in 1990, 117 in 2001 and 121 in 2005. Because of China's huge population, these ratios translate into very large numbers of excess males" (Hesketh, Li Lu & Xing). Pakistani societies also prefer sons over girls for various reasons. Here a woman's status is considered higher if she is the mother of the boy. Being the mother of a girl is sometimes not appreciable. Such cultural beliefs make parents inclined to utilize female selective abortion. Even at times, the mothers who give birth to the female child, have to face the sardonic and ignoring attitude of the elders within the family because most people suppose that the female sex of the fetus in the womb is

somehow because of the mother. They are mostly unaware of the fact that an egg from a woman's side always has an X-chromosome while it is the male reproductive cell that can have either a Y-chromosome or an X-chromosome. In simpler words, it is the male reproductive cell that determines the sex of the fetus and the outcome of such lack of knowledge may be femicide. While talking about honour killing, **Dr Humera Ishfaq** could not ignore the aspect of female infanticide. The last character in the story is a case of female foetus abortion. The narrator comes across a very small grave where there is no name except 'Daughter'. The invention of the latest medical technologies enabled knowing the sex of the foetus in the womb and consequently, female selective abortions have been made possible. Women have been given the right to use the option of abortion in certain conditions. However, the facility is also being used to commit the crime of female infanticide. Madhu Kishwar writes about it; "women began to use these tests for detection of the sex of the fetus and an overwhelming majority chose to have an abortion if the fetus was female" (Kishwar 113). Madhu Kishwar has specifically talked about such conditions in India, however, the same hostility was felt in other Asian countries as well. S. Sudha and S. IrudayaRajan found; "Lately in China and South Korea, prenatal sex determination and selective abortion of female foetuses have been increasingly implicated" (Sudha & Rajan 586). Cultural and religious ideologies make it difficult to gather exact data on FSA (female selective abortion) in Pakistan. The dense tone, like that in *Heart of Darkness*, presented by **Dr Humera Ishfaq** also speaks of the taboo factor associated with FSA. "The strength of son preference in Pakistan closely parallels that in the neighbouring region of India's northwestern plains. Thus, logically, demand for FSA in Pakistan would also be strong. Yet obtaining data to assess this possibility is especially difficult" (Miller 1086). One of the very powerful motives for FSA is also social and economic security. In most cultures, people in old age have to live with their sons not daughters. Therefore, most women would prefer to have male babies and may opt for abortion if they know that they are carrying a female fetus. "The decision to undergo FSA can also be viewed as pragmatic in the long run due to the real economic benefits and security it provides mothers in their old age, especially when widowed and living in the households of their sons" (Unnithan-Kumar 163).

Whatever the motive of FSA, it is femicide undoubtedly. The basic feature of patriarchal systems is an intention to control sexuality, reproduction and expression of the female members of the society. **Exposing various forms of patriarchy and femicide is the central idea of Dr Humera Ishfaq's short story. In a nutshell, the writer has artistically**

touched various grounds of the blind murders of women. The writer has presented the tragic murder of four characters but these four characters are the symbols of four major causes of femicide in a paternalistically authoritarian culture. Women's resistance to any restriction is mostly associated with sexuality and extra-marital relations in any patriarchal society would not be acceptable. Consequently, a woman who crosses the doorsill for the job may face what Samina (the first character in the story) did. If a mother visits the market, as Imam Bibi (the second character in the story) did, she may be found dead. Women may also be killed for consequences of forced marriage just like Zeno (the third character in the story). And in many cases to avoid the fate of Samina, Imam Bibi and Zeno, a daughter may be killed preemptively in the womb.

At the end of the story, the narrator wants to come out of that city of the dead but the doors had already been locked. It is again a symbolic situation that points to a further suffocating environment. There are textual pieces of evidence that the narrator herself is dead e.g. in the very beginning the narrator says "whether to go or not in that city was not her choice" (Ishfaq 63). Secondly, the narrator notices a grave digger ready to perform another job and thirdly, at the end the narrator is not allowed to return. Considering the narrator a representative of those who speak against injustice makes it clear that death may lay its icy hands on such spokesperson also. That is why whoever knows the secrets of these honour killings would never dare talk openly about it and the victims would be buried along with the secrets of the atrocities and those also who try to expose the secrets.

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