

A POSTMODERN STUDY OF GENDER ISSUES IN FAWZIA AFZAL KHAN'S MEMOIR

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Abstract

The purpose of the present research is to explore the ways the postmodern feminist subversive text i.e. Afzal Khan's memoir Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girlfriends Pakistani Style dismantles the gender issues in herstories of Pakistan. The research is qualitative in nature. Moreover, Mills, three-part-model has been drawn on as a research tool as it aims to rectify the way gender is represented in the phallogocentric texts into an alternative matriarchal language. The textual analysis suggests that male centric hegemonic historical narratives can be deconstructed through alternative female centric narratives. Afzal Khan interweaves the female centric worldview in her narrative with the postcolonial perspective, by suggesting and showing that female postcolonial creative writers are able to articulate feminine experiences with equal ease and authority as do men in representing their masculine experiences.

Key Words: Feminist Stylistic Analysis, Afzal Khan, gender, Memoir, postmodernism

Introduction

The present study is based on the ideological perspective of postmodernism. Lyotard (1984) sees postmodernism as a rejection of all confining cultural theories such as Marxism, Communism and Feminism. He states, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives". Postmodern literature deconstructs different metanarrative ideologies related to history, religion, class, gender and language. Afzal Khan's postmodern memoir explicitly deconstructs the metanarrative ideologies related to history, language and gender. This study aims to explore the ways the postmodern feminist subversive text i.e. Afzal Khan's memoir deconstructs the metanarrative ideology related to gender into an alternative herstories of Pakistan. For this research article, the researcher will adapt Mill's three part model (1995 p.83-153) based on the analysis at the level of word, phrase or sentence and analysis at the level of discourse. However, for the present study the researcher will conduct the analysis only at the level of phrase/sentence and discourse.

As the study deals with gender issues so it would be quite appropriate to define gender first. Gender is the disposition of socially constructed stereotypical traits and power ascribes to both sexes by the society as compared to sex which is a biological fact. So gender is a social construct. Feminists believe that this social construction of women is fundamental to women's oppression and suppression in patriarchal structures. As the French author and philosopher Beauvoir (1949) argues that "One is not born a woman, but becomes one".

Afzal Khan's memoir is a postmodern subversive feminist text. In her memoir, she deals with gender issues' prevailing in the patriarchal hegemonic society of Pakistan. She represents in her memoir a number of issues faced by the female strata of Pakistan. With a very strong interest and involvement in the shared herstories of her *sehalis*, she talks about their place in Pakistani gendered-based class structure. She shows that how women in this part of the world are politically and culturally hegemonized by patriarchal structures and elaborated that gender issues in this part of the world are structural and political rather than personal. But her *sehalis* in the memoir resist the limitations of the patriarchal definition of women. She transgresses the domineering patriarchal discourse of Pakistani literature by providing alternative images of strong and confident females in the characters of some of her girlfriends.

Research Methodology

The purpose of the present research is to investigate the gender issues. Afzal Khan's memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girlfriends Pakistani Style* has been selected as the primary source for the research data in this study. An in-depth study of the memoir has been conducted while integrating Sara Mills's three layer model. This research is primarily qualitative in nature since qualitative research encapsulates a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individual's creation which will be the focus of this research.

The researcher has picked out the postmodern devices employed by the author at the level of phrase and at the level of discourse which clearly manifest the deliberate usage of patriarchal language. It shattered the stereotypical roles associated with Pakistani Muslim women thus giving an insight to the complexity of gender issues in the paradoxical state of Pakistan as called by Afzal Khan. So the researcher's choice of Afzal Khan's memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girlfriends Pakistani Style* is insightful as it fulfills the research purpose through presenting an alternative herstory of Pakistan both in form and content of the memoir. As a result, the official history of Pakistan becomes another herstory.

Research Questions

The overarching questions of the present research are:

- How does the memoir unearth the metanarrative ideology regarding gender in the context of Pakistan?

Research Objectives

The objectives of present study are:

- To unmask how Afzal Khan dismantled the metanarrative ideology regarding gender in her postmodern subversive memoir.
- To use Mills' three part-model of feminist stylistics as a research tool to analyse the text of the memoir.

Theoretical Framework

As has been stated earlier that the present research article will adapt Mill's three parts model (1995 p.83-153) based on the analysis at phrase or sentence and analysis at the level of discourse. The objective of feminist stylistics is to investigate the female experiences in literary works and in this way literature acts as a source for the foreshadowing of women's consciousness and the deconstruction of stereotypical representation of females.

Ideology and Stereotypes of Femininity

Ideology comes under the category of analysis at the level of phrase and sentence. Mills says that many feminists argue that women are more affected by the impacts of ideology than men. Generally speaking, ideology can be seen as something negotiated by individual agents and is heterogeneous rather than unitary. In creating an ideology, people actively take part in confirming or rejecting a certain system of belief. *She* further says,

“An ideology is a sequence or set of statements which have certain conceptual links, but which individual subjects will negotiate, affirms, and/or resist” (Mills, 1997, p.149).

Mills believes that women are the victims of gender specific ideology. They are often depicted as passive recipient as compared to men who are depicted as active and passionate. This has almost become a ‘universal truth’ in our culture and it is extremely difficult to change this concept in any way. Moreover, Mills (1997) further says, “The notion of who is in control is central to this ideological gender difference, since women are generally represented as passive “recipient” of love and men are represented as “agents” .

Afzal Khan’s memoir also plays with the concept of stereotypical gender ideologies as will be later elaborated in the section regarding the textual analysis.

Exploration of Gender issues in Afzal Khan’s Memoir Through Mill’s Lens Analysis at the Level of Phrase or Sentence

In this section, the researcher will be considering ideology and figures of speech that occur in the memoir. Moreover, it will be shown that how ideology provides evidence for categorizing the memoir as a transgressive text, demonstrating the close connection between personal and political. Moreover, the analysis will unmask how females in Pakistan are manipulated through male hegemonic political and religious ideology.

The analysis of the memoir reveals that some of Pakistani Muslim women confirm Mills’ theory regarding women as the passive victims of stereotypical gender ideologies. For example the characters such as Saira, Naumana, and Afzal Khan’s mother confirm to Mills’ theory regarding women. But there are some women who do not confirm to Mills’ stereotypical image of female as passive recipient of male constructed ideology rather they are using their own agency. For example characters like Madina, Hajira and Fawzia Afzal Khan do not confirm to Mills’ theory regarding women.

Woolf (1992) also condemns that man treats woman as a mirror reflecting his image and there by acknowledging his self-presence. “Women” she writes, “have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size”

Afzal Khan narrates Saima’s murder by her own mother and uncle in the office of human rights lawyer in late 1990’s. She was murdered because she refused to go back to her ex-abusive husband and wanted to marry a man of her own choice. Subramanian calls Samia’s murder a synecdoche for the memoir of losses. Afzal Khan criticizes the way her mother uses religion as a tool to trap the guard at the gate of the office. As she says to the guard,

Please, you’ve got to let me pass, I have to see my daughter, the apple of my eyes, I prayed for her all through Hajj. I have made my piece with her decision, I swear to Allah, and I have come to tell her this, to beg her to come back home to us, and she can marry whomever she chooses....” (Khan, 2011, p.24)

The guard being trapped by Samia’s mother’s confessional outburst let her and her uncle to go upstairs to meet Samia where her uncle killed her very fast with three shots and run away from Lahore unharmed. The murdered girl’s father declared that “God’s will is done” (p.26) Islam grants both men and women the right to choose their spouses. But the memoir states that

Samia's father is taking the male interpretation of Holy Scriptures as the will of God. The memoir further states ironically that her father violates the very will of God while taking the life of her daughter only because she wants to marry a man of her own choice.

Analysis at the Level of Discourse

Mills states that (1997), "Analysis at the level of discourse is used to describe a structure beyond the level of boundaries of sentence to the level of longer text" (p.158). Moreover, Carter and Simpson (1989) states: "Discourse analysis should be concerned not simply with micro- context of the effects of words across sentences or conversational turns but also with the macro-context of larger social patterns" (p.16)

However, the researcher's analysis at the level of discourse will be mainly based on focalization and Afzal Khan's presentation of characters in the construction of herstory of Pakistan.

Focalization and Autodiegetic "I" as gender specific

Mills (1997) defined focalization as "Focalization is the process whereby the events in a story are related to the reader through the consciousness of a character or narrator" (p.178). The French feminist school of thought reacted against Lacanian's theoretical work which reserves the "I" position for men. As Jones remarks: "Lacanian theory reserves the "I" position for men. Women because they lack phallus the positive symbol gender, self-possession and worldly authority around which language is organized, occupy a negative position in language" ((Jones 1985:83).

Afzal Khan's memoir is a first person narration and she herself is the narrator of the memoir. The memoir explicitly treaded the phallic respect into feminine disrespect through employing the autodiegetic "I" to construct an alternative feminine credible voice. Her fictitious authority to non-fictitious referents has enabled her to use the narrative text as a medium through which her own voice can be channeled. The combination of authorial voice with the autodiegetic "I" is a strategy employed by Afzal Khan to transgress the conventional construction of feminine through language. The alternative style of memoir openly display that even the micro elements of narration are infested with social and cultural ideology in which the narrating "I" is not separating from the female body, but on the contrary, is gender specific. So, Afzal Khan has challenged the subject-position 'I' which is associated with men. Here 'I' is gender specific for female.

Non-linear Narrative Style

What drastically distinguish as the memoir from other artistic works is its format and its non-linear narrative style. Kristeva, (1981) argues that women subsist in different context of time rather than linear time. Linear time is devoted to measurable units while women time is divided by seasonal cycles of their lives. She further asserts that this event driven subjective time is resolved by significant happenings in women's lives. This is what is done by Fawzia Afzal Khan in the narration of herstory of Pakistan. She weaved the fragments of her memory to reconstruct herstory of Pakistan in order to unearth the phallogocentric hegemonic history of Pakistan. Through the non-linear structure of the memoir, Afzal Khan has portrayed the fragmented broken lives of her girlfriend specifically through her usage of the techniques of flashback and stream of consciousness. Memoir is supposed to be a very personal account of one's life but the very particular structure and style of the memoir enhances the idea that 'self' is relational term. So the memoir is less a narrative about self than a biography about others and she has devoted a chapter to her each girlfriend. The stream of consciousness style of writing occurs throughout the whole memoir because Afzal Khan is reconstructing the fragments of her memory. As Afzal Khan wrote,

I am angry, especially at mommy dearest why does she never stick up for me I want to go oh pleasepleaseplease no is no but why??? Because of the boys what boys she does not even have a brother it's what people will say after all a girl's reputation is all she got we must safeguard you from all possible harm we are your guardians after all....

Mummy and Daddy aren't around to share in my moment of glory and fame. Daddy has been in Dakar for over a year already and Mum left us to join him as soon as her college vacations started, taking bholu boy with her 'but leaving Farhan, my youngest brother, and me behind to finish our post-vacation extra-credit classes and exams in daily temperatures ranging between 105-110 0 F with 100 per cent humidity and fat ugly lizards crawling around everywhere. (Khan, 2011, p.41)

The same stream of consciousness prevails throughout the memoir. This prolific use of stream of consciousness enables her to produce a powerful effect that reflects the chaotic and broken lives of her girlfriends.

Genre Mixing

Another feature which distinguishes the memoir is writer's attempt to blur the boundary between fact and fiction and mixing different genres of formal and informal writing. Intertextuality is the technique employed by the memoirist. On the one hand, letter writing, footnotes and appendices are actually mode of factual and historical writing and she records herstory of Pakistan with academic formality, using the detailed footnotes to complement her argument with factual evidences. On the other hand, performance of drama, mixture of poetry and prose highlight the intertextual element of this postmodern subversive memoir where memoirist transgress the formal rules of writing to create an alternative herstory which do not confirm to the normative male hegemonic discourses.

Unreliable Narrator

The opening of the memoir is disclaimer:

While this book is a memoir and, as such based on real-life incidents, people, and places, it is nevertheless my recollection of these, hence more a matter of partial perception than "fact". Names of some people and description of some events have been changed/fictionalized to protect identities and privacy.

Thus the memoirist has shown her own unreliability and suggested that what she record is not truth but the vagaries of her memory. She seems to have a postmodern approach regarding the nature of truth that truth is relative and more a matter of perception than a fixed absolute (Khan, 2011). So the writers cannot be transparent and objective. The grammatical and syntactical mistakes as indicated in tables above and factual inaccuracies in the memoir may suggest at the very least poor editing fictive nature of the memoir. Twice, for example, Afzal Khan has narrated the death of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto by hanging as occurring in September 1979 (Khan, 2011, p.4, 56) while it actually took place in April 1979. So the memoirist is deliberately indicating her own unreliability while showing surprisingly carelessness regarding a crucial historic moment that traumatized the nation. Although the truth presented in memoir has been filtered through memoirist's subjective point of view yet by its very form, the memoir confirms the reader that the event it describes really happened and that the people it refers really existed. In the chapter named Mad/Madea, the narrator has exposed herself in bed with Mad's second husband Bakri. Here the narrator hides the degree of her own liability, leaving unclear whether her dalliance with Bakri took place before or after she herself was married. So an asymmetry remains in the exposure of herself and others.

In Afzal Khan's memoir the narration is self-reflexive and self-conscious. Afzal Khan has compared her attempt of writing that transgressive memoir with the Greek mythological figure Icarus who flew too near the sun on the wings of war and consequently melted and fell into the sea. In the same way, Afzal Khan has transgressed the stereotypical representation of women both in content and form of the memoir but she hoped to be saved unlike Icarus.

Characterization in the Memoir

The analysis at the level of discourse mainly focused on the presentation of characters and focalization. Focalization has already been discussed (c.f. 4.6.1). Now the researcher is going to analyze the portrayal of characters by Afzal Khan in her story of Pakistan.

According to Mills (1997),

Characters are made of words; they are not simulacra of humans- they are simply words which the reader has learned how to construct into a set of ideological messages drawing on her knowledge of the way that texts have been written and continue to be written, and the views which are circulating within society about how women and men are. (Mills, 1997, p.160)

Mills (1997) has criticized the stereotypical representation of females in male-oriented texts. She argued that females are often depicted as passive and are portrayed in terms of their looks and their sexual availability. Males are portrayed as strong, authoritative and active. But Fawzia Afzal Khan's portrayal of female characters does not confirm to Mills' theory regarding characters. Afzal Khan has tried to shatter the stereotypical representation of females in her memoir.

✓ Afzal Khan's Mother

Afzal Khan's parents are part of Pakistani elite class whose lives revolve around parties, charity events and pairing of their children. Afzal Khan's mother has been shown as stereotypical representative of Pakistani hegemonized women. The portrayal of her character confirms to the Mill's (1997) theory regarding women. Mills argues that female characters are often being judged in terms of their looks and their sexual availability. Afzal Khan's mother has also firmly conventional expectations for her daughter and wanted her to look beautiful to procure a good suitor. Afzal Khan reveals that despite being professor her mother is totally anti-intellectual. She does not appreciate her daughters liking for classical ragas and reading.

As she says to Afzal Khan:

"Don't read so much, you will never land husband, cross your legs when you sit...smile pleasingly...don't talk so much, don't go swimming in the middle of the day, your complexion is dark enough already"(p.xiv)

It seems that one of the main goals of Afzal Khan's mother is to find her daughter a suitable bachelor by telling her what to wear and how to behave. She constantly warns her that if she does not do anything about her appearance she will never land a husband.

Afzal Khan has also narrated her mother's own adulterous love affair. It also hints towards her bold nature to talk about taboo things about her close relatives which most of the people want to hush up to maintain their reputation.

✓ Afzal Khan's Father

Afzal Khan's father has very powerful patriarchal image that always remains unseen but regulate and run the affairs of home according to his wishes. Although Afzal Khan's father is away from home yet Fawzia figures the dominance of her father in all matters including finances, favor and family harmony on several occasions.

This scene typifies that Fawzia's father dominates any situation where decision making happens.

✓ **Afzal Khan**

Afzal Khan is the writer of the memoir and unpretentiously the main character of herstory of Pakistan. She has a very bold, adventurous, challenging, fighting and rebellious personality. She is a poet, activist, writer, and singer. And she has incorporated all these facet of her identity into her memoir and in this way she has made herstory of Pakistan more thought provoking than a simple memoir recounting her past days. She has blended the past with present and looks back at her life in Pakistan from her present position as a poet writer and activist. She has presented the self as relational in her memoir and devoted a chapter to her each girlfriend except the chapter “*Blood and Girls*” is devoted to the narrator herself. She has a fighting spirit and reveals her fighting spirit through her style and personality. For example once she brought a boyfriend in her bedroom and let her mother to scream at her on this action. She does not care to do something to impress the eligible bachelor as advised by her mother and turn to classical music. Tragedy seems to be the fate of all her girlfriends portrayed in the memoir except for the narrator who is the survivor of life troubling and life frightening disease of breast cancer. The very construction of such a transgressive memoir is revealing the unorthodox nature of the memoirist.

✓ **Saira’s Character**

In the portrayal of the character of Saira, Afzal Khan reconfirms the stereotypes of Pakistani society where women are victims and patriarchy is a dominant force. Mills (1997) argued that in most of narratives female characters are often depicted in terms of their legs and their body parts. The way, Afzal Khan portrayed the character of Saira, confirms to Mills theory regarding stereotypical representation of female characters as sexually attractive being. As Afzal Khan comments about Saira:

She came to the party with bells on her ankles. Tiny silver peas tinkled over so slightly every time she moved her creamy golden legs. We sensed rather than saw them behind the billowing cotton shalwar which draped but couldn’t quite hide the curvy texture of her womanliness. Saira was a revelation. We gawked and gulped as only twelve-year-olds can, knowing our flat-chested, flat-bottomed bodies looked pitiful in comparison.

So Afzal Khan has presented a sexualized account of Saira and one who in her view possesses idealized femininity. Saira has an arranged marriage with her cousin at the age of eighteen and she is the first one to give an account of her pleasant sex experience of her wedding night with her husband to her virginal female friends the day after her marriage. She has three children and devoted herself to domestic life to preserve the sanctity of her marriage. But subsequently she suffers nervous breakdown because of her mother in law’s cruelty and her husband’s infidelity. He develops an extramarital affair with a devilish-white woman. So Sara’s character confirms to Sara Mills’ categorization of female characters being attributed more to the private sphere than to the public life, as well as women being accessories of their husbands.

✓ **Hajira’s Character**

In the portrayal of the character of herfriend Hajira, Afzal Khan has dismantled the stereotype of Muslim women who are often depicted as submissive, conservative, oppressed, uneducated and un-western in their thinking and attire. For example Hajira’s mother is educated, liberal, progressive and enjoyed listening western classical music and Hajira introduces western singers such as Leonard Cohn, Janice Ian, Crosby, Stills, Nash Young, Simon and Garfunkel to the narrator. Boys and girls are allowed to interact freely with each other without any restriction in their circle. During Hajira’s marriage with lower- middle class communist Sufi Hajira’s mother wears sleeveless blouse with her sari. They are allowed to get western education. Perhaps they are enjoying such liberty and privileged status in the patriarchal society of Pakistan because they

belong to the elite class of Pakistan. Hajira is the first one who talks unabashedly about the tabooed discourse of menstruation to Afzal Khan and shares her experience of menstruation without using euphemisms. Hajira is the one who is talented, vivacious sensitive among Afzal Khan's *Sehalis*. After her marriage, Haji realized that her husband is a fake communist and opportunist husband who wants her to give up her art for him and retain her energies for their baby. So instead of surrendering herself to the patriarchal demands of her fake communist husband she preferred to commit suicide just after six month of her marriage leaving her death a birthday surprise for her husband. Suicide itself is a kind of deviating from the norm. "They both discovered Hajira's body, lifeless, the gun still smoking in her right hand, blood oozing out of the right side of her temple, her mouth twisted in a *sardonic smile*" (Khan, 2011, P. 57).

The memoir states that Haji's *sardonic smile* is a synecdoche for *feminine jouissance* which physically split Sufi to the ground and let him fainted. So her suicide remains immutable for her family and friends as well and the *sardonic smile* on her face is her way of challenging and satirizing the fake communism and hegemony of her husband. So she has challenged the stereotypical image of Pakistani woman and instead of surrendering to the patriarchy she prefers to commit suicide. Haji's bullet to the head to end her own life without taking permission from state, society or man is an example of *feminine jouissance* to challenge the patriarchal normative structure of Pakistani society. In this way Afzal Khan also seems to be criticizing Hajira's husband's fake communism that when a communist man is not giving freedom of expression of art to his own wife. How the same fake communist will fight for his society. She is being disgusted by her husband's fake communism as a result she committed suicide

✓ Mad/Medea's Character

Afzal Khan's friend Madina fully dismantles the stereotypical image of Muslim women. And her character totally disrupts Mills' theory regarding female characters that they are often portrayed as submissive, weak and suppressed by patriarchy and stick more to the private sphere than to the public life. She does not confirm to the norms of a traditional Pakistani respectable female. She exemplifies an unbridled female sexuality tantamount to insanity and fierce feminist aggression. She represents "liberated women" of Pakistan being a bull-headed in her secular feminism. Afzal Khan introduces her as someone who "Always did look like she had blood on her mind" (Khan, 2011, p.105).

The thrice married Madea is a husband abuser and her second husband named Bakri become an appendage to her and ostensibly turned mad to the extent that he is incomprehensibly dead at age forty. Afzal Khan's choice to name Madhu's husband as Bakri seems to be very suggestive. The name Bakri is borrowed from Urdu language which in Urdu means female goat which further connotes the bloody sacrifice of Bakr-e-Eid. So his name Bakri is an allusion to him that he has become a scapegoat in the hands of Madhu/Madea. The memoirist has tried to show that things are relative regarding suppression and oppression. It is quite unusual in the patriarchal state of Pakistan that a female is strong enough to suppress and oppress her husband rather than becoming suppressed by him.

Afzal Khan has portrayed Madea's character in many eccentric ways. She unabashedly insulted her mother, brother and sister on daily basis. She is the one who abuses rickshaw drivers publically. Although she has eccentric ways yet she is an activist tackling women affairs in the patriarchal state of Pakistan through her unorthodox theatre performances which Afzal Khan also promotes in her activism and Madea is the only friend whom she relates to ideologically. In contrast to other representations, Madea dominates the men within the narrative.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that Afzal Khan's memoir is explicitly an alternative transgressive piece of art which challenges the male centric narratives and shatters the stereotypes about Pakistani women. Gender issues are relative in the context of Pakistani society. These are not fixed. Rather there are some women who confirms to the stereotypes. On the other hand there are also some women who transgress stereotypical images while using their agencies without caring for its cost. For instance, we have seen Hajira taking her own life to compete patriarchy. Madea is an activist but she becomes eccentric while using abusive language.

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