

Women in Taufiq Rafat's Poetry: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Wedding in the Flood and Kitchens

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Abstract

Post-colonialism and feminism are among the most trending critical theories that this century has inherited from its predecessor. In recent times, the acceptability of both genres has inspired a lot of writing and research. With the passage of time and the spread of education in formerly colonial societies, especially among women, feminism has begun to take roots. This combination of postcolonial and feminism has resulted in the development of Postcolonial Feminism. The demands and directions of postcolonial feminism are different from mainstream Western feminism. This paper is a study of Taufiq Rafat's poems, Wedding in the Flood and Kitchens. Rafat's poems are a realistic delineation of life in the milieu where he was born and brought up. In his stories in verse, we find ample representation of the women of Pakistan. The feminine characters in the poems under discussion are typical of women in a postcolonial society. Therefore, they have been selected for analysis in this paper. This analysis is based on the thoughts promoted by postcolonial feminism in which women do not seek worldwide acceptance, but demand only to be accepted as living beings. It highlighted how lack of education and awareness has affected the approach of society toward women. It also brought out how baseless feminine stereotypes was generated. The poems sought a tangible solution to the problems of women in Pakistani society.

Keywords: Taufiq Rafat, Wedding in the Flood, Kitchen, Postcolonial Feminism

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1. Introduction

Taufiq Rafat depicts life as it is lived in Pakistan. His poems are multidimensional in idea and approach. In an apparently simple description, there is a lot to be excavated in terms of themes and motifs. Rafat's poems are read for the knowledge of the lifestyle in his native land. One aspect that should not go unnoticed in his poems is his female characters. He depicts the women of Pakistan, especially the rural ones, as a marginalized entity in a postcolonial society. There is no apparent trace of Rafat's being a feminist. However, the way he speaks of women between the lines necessitates the analysis of his poems under the ideas of postcolonial feminism.

According to Leela Gandhi, both feminism and postcolonialism are 'an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race...upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself.' (Gandhi 1998 p. 83) To invert these hierarchies, it is essential to locate the factors that cause their construction. In this paper, we will see how Rafat highlights these factors. Rafat cannot be tagged as a feminist. He simply captures life as realistically as possible. But the society as he presents has very little space for women. And even in that little space, they are dependent on men. In this paper, we shall analyze two of Rafat's poems, *Wedding in the Flood* and *Kitchens*, and see how he presents the position of women in Pakistani society.

2. Research Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative study of Taufiq Rafat's poems, *Wedding in the Flood* and *Kitchens*. The basic framework rests on the thoughts of postcolonial feminism, which is the promotion of the ideas of feminism in postcolonial societies. The discussion in this paper relies on a close textual analysis of the poems under discussion. Lines from these poems have been taken as references to show how Rafat highlights the position of women in Pakistani society.

2.1. Research Questions

This study will look for the answers to the following questions:

- a. What is the condition of women in Pakistani society, particularly in rural Punjab?
- b. How do the problems of Pakistani women relate to Postcolonial Feminism?
- c. What steps can be taken to improve the condition of women in Pakistani society?

3. Literature Review

Feminism, in one form or another, is a worldwide movement that seeks equal rights for women. Women in every society have suffered and still suffer certain problems owing to their culturally defined roles. Literature provides us with an awareness of these culturally defined roles. The presentation of women in literature is an interesting subject. It is through this presentation that we may assess the position and condition of women in society.

About half of the global human population is women. In every step, all over the world; women face inequality, subordination, and secondary class status. Often they are victim of the oppression, marginalization and exploitation in the patriarchal societies. (Mohajan, 2022)

The most important demand of feminism is female representativeness. It is a fact that all women in the world cannot be represented under the same criteria. The problems and predicaments vary from region to region. The position of women also varies from society to society. In terms of political, economic, and social liberties, women who belong to the formerly colonized territories are far behind when compared to Western women. Oppression, restriction, and subjugation of women in a postcolonial society become an interesting topic when we look at the role women played in freedom movements in various parts of the world.

While there are variations in the position of women in all regions, the fact that women are subjected to different types of oppression and dominance is an indisputable fact. Women of all nations have been exposed to various types of injustice and persecution in every corner of the world, but with the rise of feminist movements, the oppression and neglect of western women have

declined to a certain degree. On the other hand, the situation is the reverse for the African women since indigenous women with a certain standard of life during the pre-colonial period lost their current status after colonization. They have been incarcerated into their houses where they lose their freedom, individuality and speech. (Bolat, 2022; 1)

Since for an understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of any society, literature plays a significant role, the literature from postcolonial societies is read with the objective of learning about the social conditions of these countries in addition to artistic features. Among the various social aspects, the place and position of women as represented in indigenous literature are very significant. However, as has been mentioned earlier that women in different parts of the world face different problems, the problems of women in postcolonial societies are analyzed under the title of Postcolonial Feminism. The difference in the nature of problems can be assessed by Nayar's use of the term 'African Feminism' to classify the movement for women's rights in Africa. He believes that it originated from a sense of not receiving the due proportion of representation in Western feminism (Nayar 2008; 135). Asma Mansoor uses the term 'third-world feminism' in her article entitled, "*Marginalization*" in *third world feminism: its problematics and theoretical reconfiguration* (Mansoor, 2016). Mansoor studies the factors that affect the marginalization of women in third-world countries. Most third-world countries possess a colonial background. So, Mansoor's article may also be read in the series of works concentrating on postcolonial feminism.

Feminism, in a layman's approach, is believed to be a strictly feminine domain dedicated to highlighting the position and condition of a woman in a particular society. Therefore, most of the literary texts that people use as references to the feminist approach are written by women. However, it is notable that men with progressive approaches also keep pointing out the problems of women in their respective societies. In postcolonial societies, this trend is quite vigorous.

Pakistan is a postcolonial society. It has rich Urdu literature. At the same time, many great names opted to write in English to express their ideas. In both forms of literature, Urdu and English, we find women being represented by male and female writers in similar postcolonial feminist parameters.

In the context of Pakistani Urdu literature, there are many names we may name writers like Saadat Hassan Manto, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, and Ghulam Abbas who wrote for the rights of women. Pakistani literature in English is dominated by fiction. The concern for the place of women in a male-dominated Pakistani society has been exhibited by Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie, Sara Suleri, and Mohsin Hamid in their novels. In a research article entitled *A Postcolonial Feminist Appraisal of Pakistani English Literature*, Rida Zainab et al (2022) wrote a comprehensive commentary on the representation of women in Pakistani fiction in English. The authors of this paper analyze the part colonization played in the development of a particular mindset about the role of women in society.

Zia Ahmad (2009) suggests that '[T]he portrayals of women by Pakistani fiction writers should also be seen in the context of postcolonial feminism.' Ahmad concludes that Pakistani writers put their female characters in oppressive situations and exhibit how they learn from their painful experiences. It awakens in them a sense of 'responsibility to themselves' that enables them to be self-dependent. Ahmad mentions that Western feminist literature is an inspiration for Pakistani writers who raise their voices for the rights of women.

It is noticeable that the postcolonial feminist approach in the presentation of women in fiction found due appreciation. However, the same trend in poetry did not get much attention. Taufiq Rafat who is famous for his incorporation of native life experience in his poetry has also presented many female characters in his poems. It is for this reason that his poems *Wedding in the*

Flood and Kitchens have been selected for this study. The themes and characters of the poems offer ample opportunity for a postcolonial feminist analysis.

4. Discussion

They are taking my girl away forever,
sobs the bride's mother,
She was the shy one. How will she fare
in that cold house, among these strangers?

The opening lines of Rafat's poem *Wedding in the Flood* are an exclamation of the fears and concerns of a mother. She is worried about the future of her daughter in a strange household. The lines are an indirect comment on the socio-cultural customs and values. Like any other patriarchal society with a colonial background, the status of women in Pakistan is ambiguous. 'Women in Pakistan face many problems regarding their adjustment to marital life.' (Raza) They have the responsibility to maintain the household, but they have no role in decision-making. In simpler words, what they have to maintain is the word of men who take decisions and implement them through women. It creates a sense of uncertainty in a mother whose daughter is being married into a family she knows nothing about. The decision of the marriage was perhaps taken by the father who did not feel it important to consult his wife, much less his daughter. The major factors behind situations like this are a lack of education, ignorance of basic rights, and financial dependency which men imposed on women in most postcolonial societies. Marriage is not a casual attachment. It is a lifelong relationship with so many responsibilities.

In a society like Pakistan with a culture of a joint family system, the responsibilities become even more cumbersome. The bride has to adjust herself to the tastes and preferences of not only her husband but also every member of his immediate and extended family. Since the mother has been through this experience, her care and concern for her shy daughter are valid. It is also significant to note that no one pays any attention to the mother's words. Such weeping and commenting are considered to be a feminine whimsicality. However, from a psychoanalytical point of view, it is an outburst of emotions in the face of helplessness. Postcolonial feminism seeks a solution to this helplessness. It is a basic rule that you cannot make a bird fly once you have clipped its wings. Similarly, with so many social and cultural restrictions on women, you cannot expect them to play a vital role in affairs of national magnitude. During the freedom movement, women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in the struggle to get rid of colonial hegemony. Their voice was as significant as that of men. But the moment the colonial masters left, their roles were redefined. "Thus, once political independence has been gained, women, who had fought the same nationalist battle with and alongside the men, are sent into the kitchens. Their feminine duties must be resumed in the new nation-state." (Nayar 2008; 121) What freedom brought to them was a kind of domestic slavery. In recent times, the situation has improved to a tiny extent in urban areas. But in rural areas, there is still a need for a lot of effort to raise awareness of women's rights.

The word, *kitchens*, used by Nayar is also the title of another of Rafat's poems. This poem comments on the difference in lifestyle brought about by the changing cultural values. However, this poem, too, has a reference to the place of a woman in the house and the matters she can attend to. The narrator of the poem shares the memories of his childhood when he and his siblings rushed to the kitchen for their breakfasts. The second stanza of the poem is significant in the context of this discussion. In this stanza, Rafat describes the queenship of a mother, that is, the kitchen.

.... Discussions
Centered on primaries:
Births, deaths, marriages,

Crops. Mother presided,
Contributing only
Her presence, busy
Ladling, ladling....

It is noticeable that the mother, a woman, can preside over a discussion only in the kitchen, and not the whole house. Even in the kitchen meetings, her contribution is a mere presence. Symbolically, it is cornering women in their households, which is one of the prime concerns that feminism seeks to address. The intensity of the issue heightens when viewed from the perspective of a postcolonial social mindset. The discussion that takes place in the kitchen is about everyday affairs that are familial. Another quite palpable aspect is a sense of insecurity. The mother listens and does not add any remarks to the discussion. Perhaps, in a patriarchal society, she does not want to be called into question for any remark that she casually makes in front of the children. She poses to be too busy to respond to the discussion. The woman in the postcolonial context is a 'subaltern' who 'cannot speak'.

Wedding in the Flood also contains references to this marginalization of women. At the time of sending off, the bride is made to sit in a palanquin. Symbolically, this box-type carriage called a palanquin is a kind of restriction on the bride's free movement. Four strong men carry the palanquin. So, the stability and security of a woman are on the shoulders of men. The fourth stanza of Wedding in the Flood is very significant. It captures the situation of the bride in the palanquin.

It is dark in the palanquin, thinks the bride,
and the roof is leaking. Even my feet are wet.
Not a familiar face around me
as I peep through the curtains. I'm cold and scared.

These lines symbolically highlight the adversities in the life of a woman even in the small place allotted to her in society. However, in the name of culture, tradition, and honour, she has to continue the journey of life within her space. In the same stanza, Rafat discloses the approach of a young bride.

The rain will ruin the cot, trunk, and looking glass.

This approach seems too trite. At the time, when she is going to turn a new leaf in life, showing concern about trivial objects is the manifestation of the backwardness of women in rural Pakistan which is a postcolonial society. This backwardness of approach is a result of the constant marginalization of women. They are not given ample chances to think big.

Nayar believes that even marriage in a patriarchal society does not ensure a sense of security. In Wedding in the Flood, the bride displays her doubts about the nature and character of her husband.

What sort of man is my husband?

The importance of dowry in the life of a Pakistani woman cannot be denied. In many cases, the bridegroom and his family are interested more in the dowry than in the bride. In Wedding in the Flood, both the bridegroom and his father are reluctant at the sight of the dowry that consists of a 'cot, trunk, and looking glass'. The father of the bridegroom says:

They might have given a bullock at least,
grumbles the bridegroom's father; a couple of oxen
would have come in handy at the next ploughing.
Instead, we are landed with
a cot, a tin trunk, and a looking glass,
all the things that she will use!

The bridegroom, however, is ready to compromise on dowry if the bride turns out to be as beautiful as he desires.

I like the look of her hennaed hands
gloats the bridegroom, as he glimpses
her slim fingers gripping the palankeen's side
If only her face matches her hands,
and she gives me no mother-in-law problems,
I'll forgive her the cot and the trunk
and looking glass.

This approach puts a question mark on the worth of the bride, a woman. It also leads the discussion to one of the key concepts of feminism, that is, sexuality. The woman has to be sexually attractive to please her husband. It reduces the whole being of a woman to a commodity for sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Even that is not enough. She has to be submissive to ensure peace in the life of her husband. In short, it is up to the woman to meet all the criteria of acceptability. Unlike Western feminism in which women have discarded these criteria of acceptability, postcolonial feminism still focuses on accepting women as beings.

The marginalization of women is further strengthened by labelling women with clichés. In Pakistani society, there is a superstitious belief that a girl should not eat in the cooking pot. If she licks the cooking pot, there will be rain on her wedding day. The bride in the poem *Wedding in the Flood* is repeatedly blamed for licking the cooking pot. The continuous rain on the wedding day is attributed to her pot-licking.

The narrator of the poem says:

This girl has been licking too many pots.

The bridegroom expresses his resentment at the same point in the following words:

It was my luck to get a pot-licking wench.

Even the bridegroom's father comments:

The silly girl's been licking too many pots.

It shows that a woman is a soft target in a patriarchal society. She can be blamed for the happenings in which she has no role.

5. Conclusion

The discussion above reflects the position of women in Pakistani society, particularly in rural set-ups. It has been an acknowledged fact that no society can thrive without the active participation of women. What Pakistani society needs is the broadening of the sphere of activity for women. They have to be ensured of their position and prestige in society. They can be given a sense of emancipation by allowing them to have an education, involving them in decision-making, and offering them opportunities for financial self-reliance. During the struggle for national freedom, they made as many sacrifices as men. They must have endured all the pain and misery with hope for true independence. However, if they are denied true independence, they will be justified in asking if it was the freedom they toiled for.

In Rafat's presentation of women of rural Punjab in Pakistan, we observe what Raj Kumar Mishra demands:

Since lives, experiences and circumstances of postcolonial women differ utterly from that of Western women, so feminists of postcolonial origin should come forward and make differences visible and acceptable across cultures; otherwise get ready to take on colonized garbs of identity. If lives, experiences, and circumstances of women of postcolonial settings are divergent, they should be judged, evaluated, and treated as such hence 'postcolonial feminism' consolidated. (Mishra, 2013)

Rafat has quite tactfully highlighted the problems of women. His diction and tone are suggestive. Nor does he try to be didactic in his presentation of women. He simply sheds light on social behaviours and leaves it to the readers to comprehend the issues of women.

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