

# The Horizon: South Asian Muslim Women on Faith, Living, Attitude

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## The Horizon: South Asian Muslim women on faith, living, attitude

*The impetus of this paper comes from the urgency of finding the Muslim woman in the conundrum of South Asia. Particularly in relation to her faith, her expressions and the mosaic of reflections that give form to her environment. This study seeks to hear their voices coming out of a wider South Asian literary tradition and record how they experience through their bodies the patriarchal adversities embedded in community, history and symbols of faith.*

The threshold of Muslim women in South Asia has been historically an invaded one. The smothering saturation of diktats centred on women has caused them to be captured within an inevitable struggle against the conventional man. The myriad of woes the writer records through satire or in the tone of the non-conformist can be organised to form a discourse wherein the writer emanates through the bondage of her body, to introduce to others, her senses and her weight in history. The diverse nature of the constraints subjected to her leaves patterns or impressions on her psyche and therefore her manifestations in literature.

The core countries of South Asia are the secular India, the Islamic countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan, Buddhist Sri Lanka while Afghanistan and others are often added. It is home to over one fifth of the world's population, making it both the most populous and most densely populated geographical region which boasts of one of the largest concentration of Muslim population. Religion plays an integral role in everyday life and it is reflected in the region's politics. The female in this situation experiences closed societies, illiteracy, politicisation of religion, censorship – as they merge with her space. Their writings therefore reveal an intricate interweaving of the political and the personal, which Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues is beyond confessions or immediate feelings but something deeply historical and

collective (qtd. in Singh 3).

The writers discussed here give evidence of the vexed friction between the dominant religious-cultural policy and proponents of secularism. Any form of resistance for social justice for women has been met with fierce uproar from various platforms who take advantage of the dual legal structure which makes women vulnerable to exploitation by alliance of religious and secular interests. In overpopulated countries afflicted with a variety of issues women's plight receives limited priority. Studying the effects of reactionary Islam in its contribution to a collective female anxiety in South Asia is pertinent in understanding the Muslim female writers. The authors positioning in the patriarchal society they seek to transform. The South Asian female writer herself constitutes an undeniable facet of her literary identity occupied as she is in resisting the consummation of her body by a Muslim collective that is in a constant state of binary – divided between “progressives” and “fundamentalists” (Pathak, Rajan 561).

Immense volumes of misfortune suffered under the brunt of patriarchy are recorded in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan as women continue to be drowned in masculine release of energy, his phallus. He remains a central presence in her discourse. Hélène Cixous, Keith and Paula Cohen argue that as a militant, the woman is an integral part of all liberations so she must be farsighted and not limited to a blow-by-blow interaction (9). The South Asian Muslim writer's feminist vision of social transformation and change is however at times solely limited to her preoccupation with male doctrines that surround her body. But their criticisms, deeply collective, nevertheless reveal what Mohanty describes as the political consequences of being a woman (qtd. in Singh 22).

## The Fallen

The radical elements that for women cut across class and other divides of a South Asian society, with an arm heavily intertwined in politics, does not allow female citizens space to divert from diktats that serve the needs of a patriarchal society centred solely upon the conservation of patrimony. French Philosopher Simone De Beauvoir while deconstructing the myths surrounding 'the weaker sex' points out the tendency to identify women with altruism, which guarantees to man absolute rights in her devotion and imposes on her a categorical imperative (284). Altruism towards the creator and his creations form the core of various religious traditions but women, due to her historically subjugated status, are made to be the mules of imposed selflessness in a lopsided society that creates and nurtures the myth of woman. Transgression from this state, which Beauvoir calls immanence, is an act for which women can be punished, disqualified and pushed beyond the safety of society.

Muslim women are thus products of the treatment they have tempted and by the levels of their transgressions. It is this persisting threat of violence that robs Muslim women their ownership of the religion, if not resourcefully evaded, assumes controls of major aspects of their everyday life. In such a situation women are advised to write with their bodies so their bodies can be heard and act as gateways to the immense resources of the unconscious (Cixous, K. Cohen and P. Cohen 7). Writers who have felt the burden and experienced the brink of society have used the 'fallen' or 'bad woman' symbols to audaciously reflect the blows their minds have endured. It is at once a proud label, an expression of satire, pure anguish and mark of injustice suffered in the hands of intolerant elements of the Muslim collective. A historical understanding of these writers' real life activities will prove beneficial towards understanding their literature. The fallen or the exiled lives outside the fallacy of a

patriarchal destiny and therefore must bear the burden of reflecting through her body and so-called sin, all the ills of society.

Kishwar Naheed, prominent Urdu poet and activist born to an undivided India in 1940, is the ultimate 'Buri Aurat' and also the author of her own liberation. As a cultural response to the politics of religious rhetoric brought on by Gen Zia ul Haq and the Hudood Ordinance he promulgated in 1979 which did not differentiate between rape and adultery, Naheed wrote her poem "Hum Gunaigar Auratain" which was translated in English to "We Sinful Women" by Rukhsana Ahmed. She weaves a collective voice of women who echo the badness assigned to them to convey masterful criticism against the force that wants to rob her of her autonomy.

"It is we sinful women

who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns

who don't sell our lives

who don't bow our heads

who don't fold our hands together.

"It is we sinful women

while those who sell the harvests of our bodies

become exalted

become distinguished

become the just princes of the material world.

It is we sinful women

who come out raising the banner of truth  
 up against barricades of lies on the highways  
 who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold  
 who find that tongues which could speak have been severed.

It is we sinful women.

Now, even if the night gives chase  
 these eyes shall not be put out.

For the wall which has been razed  
 don't insist now on raising it again" (10).

The poet has set these women apart on the basis that they do not subscribe to the propaganda of men who have taken the front seat of her faith. Besides weaving a collective female voice, Naheed attributes numerous actions and spatial explorations to the women within her poetry in sharp contrast to their restricted movements in society. "The sinful women of the poem are not overawed by the repressive forces out to silence voices of dissent; they are ready to defy their diktats and challenge them" (Singh 18). The poet insists, against the volume of evidence produced by mullahs, that these women who refuse to heed to "the wall which has been razed" are the actual bearers of truth. She raises her "banner of truth against the barricades of lies" in her poem as she did during her days of street demonstrations as a member of the Women's Action Forum (WAF), an organisation of women professionals against Zia's rule. Naheed's relationship to her faith here becomes a battle over who has legitimate ownership of knowledge. She therefore imagines the fallen women as rebellious but also unified and better informed than the rest.

Fahmida Riaz is another liberated figure in Urdu literature who has formed her own symbol of a bad woman. Riaz like Naheed is a professional who suffered persecution, detention, exile and unemployment for her writings against the Zia regime and the male-headed governments that followed. Her poem *Wo zane napaak hai* or 'She is a Woman Impure' from her second collection of verse *Badan Dareeda* or *Body Exposed*, is a depiction of her inner struggles rather than a political one. It is an encapsulation of her disillusion with sexuality which she says is "forcibly subjugated to social needs" (dawn.com). Riaz, then a young married woman, consciously painted a fallen Eve with the use of erotic and sensual symbols that aroused severe reservations in religious proponents.

"She is a woman impure  
 Imprisoned by her flowing blood  
 in a cycle of months and years.  
 Consumed by her fiery lust,  
 in search of her own desire,  
 this mistress of the devil  
 followed his footsteps  
 into a destination obscure  
 unmarked, unmapped before,  
 that union of light and fire  
 impossible to find.

In the heat of her simmering passion  
 her breasts have ripped  
 By each thorn of the wayside  
 every membrane of her body ripped.



No veil of shame conceals her body

No trace it bears of sanctity.

But O Ruler of land and oceans,

Who has seen this before?

Everywhere your command is supreme

Except over this woman impure

No prayer crosses her lips

No humility touches her brow” (Riaz 8).

The image of a fiery female trekking on uncharted lands and beyond the almighty’s grace is conveyed to describe the unnatural isolation of women who are lured by desires. References to genesis, original sin, women’s persisting impurity especially during her monthly cycles during which she allegedly must refrain from prayers are all woven into Riaz’s agonising picture. One cannot help but feel that the body Riaz paints is the unveiling of the Muslim women who suffer sexual defeats within the secrecy of a ‘Chadur’ or behind ‘Purdah’. Riaz, disappointed by the attempts to domesticate her, unites her anxieties to create a fallen woman who because of her intense individual desire is termed - the mistress of the devil. The frustration and anger “at the knowledge of women being considered ‘unclean beings’ in the land of the pure, is apparent in the array of symbols Riaz uses to expose her anxieties through vivid references to the female body (Tribune.com). The Devil, his footsteps and the heat that emanates from within the impure woman’s breasts intensifies her struggle and boldly challenges the attempts to prohibit women from accessing their sensualities or draw attention to their bodies. “Cloistered and confined within the four walls, women in Islamic society of Pakistan are forced into silent submission and subjected to suffering if they defy societal norms” (Singh 00). But Riaz reacts to her impure status by conveying the uneasy relationship

women are made to have with their creator. Miriam Cooke in her highly introspective book 'Women Claim Islam,' writes that there has always been an active force separating men's Islam from that of women (7). The extremities of the hegemonic forces with which women are shown a religion separate from men actually turn them away entirely. Riaz finally cuts through the earth's intermediaries to emit her anger to the 'Ruler of Land and Oceans' who she says has no command over her wretched body. The impure woman of her poetry rejects his sovereignty as response to being isolated as the Other.

Bangladeshi writer, poet and physician Taslima Nasrin has taken on the bad woman slur more than any of her contemporaries in the country. She writes and speaks extensively on the allegedly down-trodden status offered to women by Islam and rejects it in full, which earned her a bounty on her head and banishment. Bangladesh was liberated from Pakistan in 1971 with the spirit of the non-communal but it could not due to the derailment from its original Constitution, disallow fundamentalists from re-entering its stream of politics. Nasrin's work has the notoriety of being vulgar because she rarely shies away from documenting unpleasant facets of her country's male-dominated reality and perverted preying on women of which she is both witness and victim. She also uses her bad woman-label to write 'Nashta Meyer Nashta Gaddo' (Fallen Prose of a Fallen Woman), which brings together several monologue-styled columns that resonate her isolation and captivity.

One of her prose titled 'Ar Rekhona Adhare Amay Dekhte Dao' or 'Do not leave me in the dark, let me see', Nasrin expresses the wish to roam carelessly like the men who loiter on the city's footpaths, on the banks of a river or crowd the staircase of the parliament building. Her wish to lie on the grass unnoticed is however paired with what she predicts the consequences will be.

“Ami jani, khub bhalo korei jani, amar icchegula ghotate gele amak loker dhil, thutu, ga-dhakka khete hobe. Amak opodosto hote hobe, dhorshita hote hobe. Amak keu ‘pagol’ bolbe, keu ‘noshto’ bolbe, kintu shokole nishchoi e-kotha shikar korben, kono purusher belai e-dhoroner icchake purtona dite gele oshlil bakkoban e take ahoto hote hoi na ...” (Nasrin 183)<sup>1</sup>

It is only the ‘whore’ who walks beyond borders, shamelessly and by herself, says Nasrin on fallen women (183). The men of rigid society scorn and ridicule her and is excited by the need he has of her and therefore keeps her close for convenience. Meanwhile the domestic females terribly fear the label of ‘whore’ which a woman can earn very easily by which she is agreement with Cixous, K Cohen and P Cohen who write: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (7) This in turn ensures the success of male hegemony which is able to maintain a subservient female indoors and the isolation of ‘whores’ for easy control and entertainment outdoors. French philosopher Michel Foucault while discussing ‘The Body of the Condemned’, said the certainty of punishment, and not its horror, deters one from transgression. He argues that punishment no longer touched the body. If it did, it was only to get at something beyond the body: the soul (10). Pariah women therefore act as reservoirs of society’s filth and secrets since they live on its edges and have no way to reciprocate what she receives.

Ismat Chughtai’s bad woman, however, is as cursed and she is free. She employs humour to speak of the unscrupulous simpletons of a Muslim moholla where she sets her feisty protagonist, the bastard child Lajo, in her short story ‘The Homemaker’. Homeless, she survived with the help of her body which she realised was her only asset.

1. I know very well that they will stone, shove and spit one if I do what I desire. I will be harassed or raped. I will be called ‘mad’ or ‘a prostitute’. But everyone will agree that men don’t have to suffer verbal abuse, abduction, rape for fulfilling these very desires. ”

“She didn’t haggle. It was wonderful if it was a cash down proposition; if not it was sex on credit. And if someone could not pay even on credit, it was sex on charity” (Chughtai 45).

Lajo as a maid represents the most economically insecure section of the population, who is impervious to the prerequisites of honour and instead loyal to her intrinsic needs. She craves the physical home of her employer turned husband Mirza, a god-fearing grocer who frequents the neighbourhood courtesans, but feels their marriage was like a ‘sadist contraption’ - the expression she uses to describe her incarceration - the tight Churidar pyjamas Mirza forces her to wear instead of the erotic Lehenga. Chughtai’s highly-sensual and pragmatic heroine therefore refuses to be tamed and neglected by throwing away the safety of marriage and returning to the life of a free mare who engages in illicit sex with Mirza who again becomes just her employer. Chughtai, an author rooted in reality, ridicules through Lajo the homogenisation of the domestic female as she places her against the harsh but liberated life of a hardened woman who is a stranger to bashfulness.

The role of body in female expression and liberation in literature is key to understanding the diverse use of the so-called fallen woman in Muslim women’s writing in South Asia. “Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?” (Cixous, K. Cohen and P.Cohen 3). In most cases the overburdening of the soul is why these women reflect back the status that is easily enforced on those who chooses to transcend their man-made boundaries. Their unique experience with the slur decides how, why and what they use to form these symbols but in most cases they have revealed the motives behind their plight before taking ownership of their impure realms.

## The Enemy of the Body

Numerous vulnerabilities are made available to the female body which can be more than confiscate it from her. “A woman without a body is dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter, says Cixous (7). Female bodies, particularly apprehended in Muslim communities, have been invaded, stashed away, cloaked, punished and conditioned to be silent. Women, in stark contrast to reductive efforts of fundamentalists to limit her reach, see their manifestations in entities they have come to love and can relate their own existences to. Miriam Cooke while discussing women's struggle to assume authority of their Islam in Middle East says, “official preoccupation with women's bodies threatens their abilities to make their own decision” (vii). The threats and wounds of male invasion into women's physical and mental space are conveyed in the writings of South Asia. Their spaces of autonomy are conveyed through the natural, everyday symbols that encapsulate, give forms and features to the desires of a confined being.

Latifa, the pseudonym of a teenage girl, who recounts her life in her autobiography “My Forbidden Face” from the day the Taliban entered Kabul, begins it with the heavy air of defeat. “We knew the Taliban were close ... But no one really thought they'd get as far as this. As far as Kabul ...” (2). The Taliban's take on women forms a focal feature of its ideas that serve as examples of regressive radicalisation of Islam. Latifa presents herself as the daughter of a brutalised people who have always known war. But it is her city Kabul, who she believed was indomitable, that gave her a sense of sovereignty and despite surrounding regions falling into insurgency Kabul's boundaries still allowed her to live in her own terms. “But even under the Soviets, even under the rocket fire of enemy factions, even amidst the ruins, we still lived freely in Kabul” (00). This prolonged faith in its formidability and the

naive desire to preserve their natural lives did Latifa and her elder sister 'Soraya', very well aware on the ways of the Taliban, initially ignored the news of the their white flag fluttering near their home.

Every thinkable space of life had invaded and settled in by the militia men, records Latifa and the most heinous of its numerous rules it showered on women. In a jealous rage against allowing any form of comfort or attention to women by banishing them from receiving healthcare, education, employment, travelling or wearing undergarments.

“I go to my room to look at all my things, my books clothes, photos, comics, music tapes, videos and posters. My nail polish, Soraya’s lipstick...We’ll have to pack all this up in cardboard boxes and hide it in the closet. I’m crushed, at moments enraged, in tears a second later. My mother and my sister and I find this petty tyranny over our personal lives intolerable” (Latifa 4)

In the face of brute chaos the 16-year old, who aspires to study journalism, nurtures what she feels is her genuine journalistic right to be able “to read everything, know everything, understand everything” and for that she wants to go to see, the former president Nazibulla hanged with a pipe in the public square, and be witness to the incredible things happening in her country. The female body here faced with an abrupt wall into her space finds and implements creative methods to expand her constrained space.

“This time, they’re really killing us, killing all girls and women. They’re killing us stealthily, in silence. The worst prohibitions, which have already been established throughout the great majority of the country, annihilate us by locking us outside society” (Latifa 4)

In Latifa’s account we come across rebellions and recession by women faced with a brute force. An out-of-work flight attendant Narguisse pulls off her chadri in defiance of the Talibs who was obviously relegating women by not allowing them to enter their old workplace and instead erected a make shift shack of tin, with just a peephole, before the Airline office to pay off the women’s dues. Latifa who was also present was repelled by the Taliban’s take on women who not only required that women be jailed in chadris but still felt the need to segregate them further by putting up a wall of corrugated tin before her. It was their unbarred expression of misogyny that took the form of relocating and monitoring of women. The oppressed in this case treads towards rebellion like Narguisee who struggles like a demon or falls back to an inner space like Latifa’s weary mother, a retired doctor, “who swallows her sleeping pills to take refuge in a dreamless sleep...where the Taliban can’t touch her.”

The struggle for space is a strong presence in Taslima Nasrin’s prose as she lusts for unrestricted exploration of her city and beyond. Her desires are almost always paralleled with a fear of being intruded by the people who inhabit and surround the places she wants to visit. Female driving is still very rare in Bangladesh, despite the participation women have in various services, the world of outside is still a man’s domain. The author mentions her love for cars and speed and she ardently repeats this liking probably in an effort to convey her involvement in an act considered exclusively masculine. She uses real life symbols such as

the relentless traffic of Dhaka to reflect the congestion of politics, poverty and religion that pulls society back but Taj Hashmi complicates the problem further in his study of popular Islam in Bangladesh where he argues that, “Misogyny is so well-entrenched in society that no single measure, such as spread of literacy or enactment of laws, is a good antidote” (2).

Nasrin struggles for natural space in her prose ‘Nagorik Khacha’ or ‘Urban Cage’ where she decries the barrenness of urban life and also the darkness of the rural as they both determine female movement.

“Shurjer alo Dhaleshwarir jole khela kore – shedike takiye  
thaki, kintu snayu amak udash hote deina, nibir hote deina,  
ora shobai bhir kore amar kapor chopor dekhe, chul dekhe,  
mukher kotha dekhe, hata dekhe, hashi dekhe, drishti dekhe”  
(Nasrin 203)<sup>2</sup>.

Nasrin describes the regressive scrutiny of women by literate, semi-literate and illiterate male members, of all age, which attempts to invalidate her adulthood, achievements and replaces them with the purposelessness of misogyny. Forced into a perpetual state of apprehension, the author records the piercing inquiries that are hurled towards women -I am a woman, why am I outside? Why is my hair cut short? Why am I alone? Why am I driving a car?

Nasrin expresses her elation at getting to drive a shiny Toyota Sprinter at the beginning of her prose. She describes in details the bliss of being in control of a car and mentions that this joy is only occasional as she herself does not own a car. It gives away the way some basic expression, like travel, movements are interrupted in case of a female and isolated as atypical behaviour. Nasrin’s focus on powerful cars is a conscious embodiment of freedom and

<sup>2</sup>“The rays of the setting sun danced on the waters of Dhaleshwari- I gazed at it but my nerves wouldn’t let me unwind, they form a crowd around me and stare at my clothes, my hair, the words I utter, my gate, my laugh and the way I stare”



legitimization of her being against institutionalised societal norms. She clearly points out that women can be in some public spaces but they cannot remain there as men are encouraged to. Women, she says are expected to do their business and move on” (88). Nasrin recalls being overwhelmed by curious eyes that see her as an oddity. The onlookers eventually exhibit their perverse excitement by encroaching on the car’s body, her extended self, and the writer feels the insults pierce through the metal to land on her nervous body.

“Ora ektu ektu kore ghire dhorchilo amak, ami oder thaba theke nijeke bachiye amar jan jontrer dike egolam. Start dicchi ora keu dhil churchhe, keu chor dicche, keu kil dicche sprinter er dhatob shorire. Amar mone holo sprinter er dhatob shorire na, ora amar shorire dicche chor kil, dhil” (Nasrin 203).<sup>3</sup>

Nasrin’s effort to explore ends in an unshakably depressive tone and she is ridiculed for trying to emulate men as a cold war rages on between the inhabitants of Muslim societies divided especially on how they view women. The world outside, dominated by men, can be a perilous one she writes as she describes how strangers sexually prey on women’s bodies amid the crowd before the gates of the Ekushey Boi Mela. With conviction she asserts how the ugly and uncivil came to be an undeniable part of the Bangladeshi experience especially for women. Her prose ‘Ashai Ashai Thaki’ or “I keep hoping” illustrates a collective fear Bangladeshi women have of crowds and the outdoors which for them translates to lurking men. Excited by the presence of women, they stealthily yet freely derive pleasure by grabbing bodies of female strangers when they queue up to enter the fair. Nasrin is among the very few who dedicatedly wrote about this particular culture of violating unsuspecting females who can do very little besides erupting in rage and quivering with humiliation. Her focus lies on how a culture of impunity regarding violations of women’s bodies and a general consensus

<sup>3</sup>“They were gradually surrounding me, I start to walk towards my machine to save myself from their grip. As I start the engine, some of them hurl stones, some slap or punch the sprinters metallic body. I feel their slaps, hurls and knocks are not landing on the sprinters metallic body, but on me. The abuses they hurled were hitting me.”

on the weakness women has muted females in her country. In such pretext women view their own bodies as burdens, as something they must nervously protect instead of living beyond its constraints.

Kishwar Naheed's 'Anticlockwise' or 'Hijarat' is a ground for the eroding yet rebellious body of a woman. Naheed writes that even if all her senses die away under the grinding doctrines of patriarchy, more precisely Zia's Hudood Ordinance, she will still be able access her thoughts. She weaves her lines bringing into focus "male fear of women as competitors and rivals" and misogyny as an indispensable tool "in the realm of ideology, for legitimizing patriarchy and the inherent privileges associated with it for the "stronger sex" (Hashmi 1). The speaker in Anticlockwise defies the confines of her immediate senses and threatens her oppressors with the knowledge that women live beyond their objectifications and are no way convinced of what she is told of her inferior and alien status. She portrays how a liberated woman arouses fear in men who cannot rest until he is able to contain and manipulate all her abilities. The poet painfully synchronises the loss of a woman's senses to the reversal of time which describes the backwardness of the Hudood Ordinance. Pandit points out how attention given to each anatomical parts – the eyes, the nose, the lips and the anklets in each stanza bears the resonance of traditional love poems which attribute its attention towards defining each aspect of female beauty. But Naheed's Anti-clockwise with its graphic portrayal of decaying eyes, lips and nose and chaining of the anklet, she writes, places the poet "in the corpus of anti-establishment poets and conditions her point of view which is evident in her irreverential attitude towards traditional normative symbolism. The image then is a marker of her sympathy towards the subaltern which counts women as among a significant constituency" (Pandit 6).

Even if my eyes become the soles of your feet  
even so the fear will not leave you  
that though I cannot see  
I can feel bodies and sentences  
like a fragrance.

Even if, for my own safety, I rub my nose in the dirt till  
it becomes invisible  
even so this fear will not leave you  
that even though I cannot smell  
I can still say something.

Even if my lips singing the praises of your godliness  
becomes dry and soulless  
even so this fear will not leave you  
that though I cannot speak  
I can still walk.

Even after you have tied the chains of domesticity,  
shame and modesty around my feet even after you have paralysed me  
this fear will not leave you  
that even though I cannot walk  
I can still think.

Your fear of me being free, being alive  
and able to think might lead you, who knows, to what travails.

Naheed depicts a growing anxiety of the hetero-patriarchal and pins it as something aggressively unnatural, because there cannot exist any functional society where women are denied participation, despite its institutional attempts to become for Muslim women, an intermediary and parallel authority to God. The image of postulation before men and singing of his praises are to address the desire of patriarchal men who wishes to secure his so-called divine supremacy. Rubina Saigol describes that the Hudood Ordinance was the “state’s attempt to write its Islamic credentials on the bodies of women” and “the more it came to define itself in narrowly religious terms, the more it rendered itself an exclusivists state intolerant of difference, diversity and contestation” (71).

The poet also takes on the form of the ubiquitous survivor, the grass, in her poem “The grass is really like me”. Pandit points out that a “typical civilized word for grass in Urdu verse would be ‘sabza’ rather than the mundane ghaas” and “in opting for the mundane Naheed is disrupting the historical continuity of the ‘shareef’ or muslim gentle woman – thereby appropriating the form to be marked with the ‘vulgar’ autobiographical style’ of a woman who goes unabashedly as a bad woman” (Pandit 4). Through identifying her body with the earth she ascribes to its fertility and femininity and makes the lawnmower the disconnected and artificial other. Naheed takes ownership of her body, in the form of the visibility and reality of grass, against centuries of overwhelming patriarchal definitions that places Muslim men at the centre and conveniently places women in the realm of the other.

The grass is also like me  
 it has to unfurl underfoot to fulfil itself  
 but what does its wetness manifest:  
 a scorching sense of shame  
 or the heat of emotion?

The grass is also like me  
As soon as it can raise its head  
the lawnmower  
obsessed with flattening it into velvet,  
mows it down again.  
How you strive and endeavour  
to level woman down too!  
But neither the earth's nor woman's  
desire to manifest life dies.  
Take my advice: the idea of making a footpath was a good one.

Those who cannot bear the scorching defeat of their courage  
are grafted on to the earth.  
That`s how they make way for the mighty  
but they are merely straw not grass  
-the grass is really like me.

Naheed actively took part in the protests as Pakistan stipulated multiple laws that sought to contain females, their sexualities and through the passing of multiple laws and the Law of Evidence In 1984 which effectively reduced the citizenship of women and non-Muslims to second-class status. Naheed describes the states Islamisation as really an obsession of perfecting women which is attained by stripping her of citizen status and rendering her submissive by making any violence against her body a matter, not of the state, but of the private sphere. The poet`s grass is a rebel against tyranny which has to “unfurl underfoot” and seek a definition of its “wetness”, an image of a natural phenomenon, in an environment where she is denied access to her own sexuality. Pandit focusing on the plurality of the

poem's symbol grass describes the image of wetness as that of a diffused sexuality and in the context cites Luce Irigaray who points out that "[woman's] sexuality always at least double, goes over further: it is plural....woman has more sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost everywhere." (Pandit 7). Naheed's illustration of her earthy body claims that the poet's beliefs are rooted in nature and she will never perform the falsity of drawing from the man-made society she lives in.

Fahmida Riaz asks the most integral questions in a noticeably subjugated voice in her "Chadur and Char Diwari" or "Four Walls and a Black Veil" considered one of her most controversial work. She points out during a monologue to the "the Master of men", a rotting and naked corpse in his scented chamber. The revelation of this ancient corpse and its nature envelopes the poem and reverses the focus from the speaker who was to be veiled originally and Riaz as she points out how useless this veil is to her, terms it as a "reward", possibly as a pun towards the tags of protection and feminine piety its advocates like to attach to it. The corpse is first located in a perfumed chamber but its stench is personified as "she" haunts every alleyway and makes its misery known in every doorway, an image of an airy entity amid an unconscious civilisation, strikingly similar to T.S. Eliot's feline smog in The love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock. Riaz insists that the black veil cover the corpse who is screaming to have her death and nakedness shrouded.

Sire! What use is this black chadur to me?

A thousand mercies, why do you reward me with this?

I am not in mourning that I should wear this

To flag my grief to the world

I am not a sinner nor a criminal  
That I should stamp my forehead with its darkness  
If you will not consider me too impudent  
If you promise that you will spare my life  
I beg to submit in all humility  
O Master of men!  
In your highness' fragrant chambers  
lies a dead body  
Who knows how long it has been rotting?  
It seeks pity from you  
  
I am not a disease that needs to be drowned in secret  
darkness  
  
Sire, do be so kind  
Do not give me this black chadur  
With this black chadur cover the shroudless body  
lying in your chamber  
  
For the stench that emanates from this body  
Walks buffed and breathless in every alleyway  
Bangs her head on every doorframe  
Covering her nakedness  
  
Listen to her heart rending screams  
Which raise strange spectre  
That remain naked in spite of their chadur.

Who are they ? You must know them , Sire.

Your highness must recognise them

These are the hand - maidens

The hostages who are halal for the night

With the breath of morning they become homeless

They are the slaves who are above

The half-share of inheritance for your

Highness's off-spring.

These are the Bibis

Who wait to fulfil their vows of marriage

In turn, as they stand, row upon row

They are the maidens,

On whose heads , when your highness laid a hand  
of paternal affection,

The blood of their innocent youth stained the  
whiteness of your beard with red

In your fragrant chamber , tears of blood,

life itself has shed

Where this carcass has lain

For long centuries, this body spectacle of the murder  
of humanity.



Bring this show to an end now

Sire, cover it up now

Not I, but you need this chadur now.

For my person is not merely a symbol of your lust:

Across the highways of life, sparkles my intelligence

If a bead of sweat sparkles on the earth's brow it is

my diligence.

These four walls, this chadur I wish upon the

rotting carcass.

In the open air, her sails flapping, races ahead

my ship.

I am the companion of the New Adam

Who has earned my self-assured love.

The speaker's repetitive efforts to remind "the highness", a Islamised state, of the lives the age old corpse ironically shows how patriarchal elements tend to consciously forget the plight of women after they are stripped and confined. She urges the authority to wear that veil, which she says is a stamp of darkness befitted for a sinner who continues to sit on the corpse of humanity. Multiple images of alarm are woven with screams of a spectre, sexually violated hand-maids and maidens who wait in line for their only task, marriage, ends with a form of sexual slaughter and the patriarchy, which feeds on their lives, is thus shown via the white beard smeared with blood. Riaz announces herself liberated from this vicious cycle and displays her preference for the "new Adam", who earns her self-assured love, and is meant to further spark "the mullah's inherent hatred for the modern, independent woman due to the

latter's defiance and hatred for the mullah, who is the least desirable person as her partner for life" (Hashmi 10).

The subcontinent and its women are unabashedly revealed by Ismat Chughtai and her stories are moist with sexuality and curiosity of the South Asian female as well as humour that echoes from within a collective middle class identity but Chughtai's individual remains unparalleled. She burst out at a time when women rarely expressed what was natural to them. About herself she notes: "Perhaps my mind is not an artist's like Abdur Rahman Chughtai's [her elder brother] but an ordinary camera that records reality as it is...Nothing can interfere with this traffic between the mind and the pen" (Mahfil 172). Her work returns life to women as they go about her stories exhibiting vivacious frankness especially in relation to their bodies and sexual desires. Chughtai was inspired into her rebellious form of literature by the writings and activities of gynaecologist and communist writer Rashid Jahan, termed "Urdu literature's first angry young woman" whose membership in the then infamous 'Angare' group and its "virulent criticism against conservative behaviour and outmoded thinking within the Indian family system generally and more specifically the treatment of women in a male dominated society," (Coppola, Zubair 170) established and vilified Jahan as a firm radical in 1932. The young writers had declared war against the prevailing condition of Indian society through their audacious short stories besides introducing a freer style of Urdu writing by experimenting with the stream of consciousness technique. It is also the publication of Angare which is acknowledged as the origin of the left leaning All-India Progressive Writers Association formed in 1936 of which Chughtai was a spirited member. But Chughtai's sublime style is distinguishable from the didactic efforts of Jahan. In an interview given to Mahfil in 1972 Chughtai says that she wrote in the way she spoke, and not "literarily", during a time when the trend was to either write romantically or progressively.

She attributes her frankness to her family who she said were all like her- peculiar mad, bold, rude and quarrelsome. She tells Mahfil that Rashid Jahan too had a hand at spoiling her, whose loud and carefree expressions had greatly attracted the young Chughtai who then, “just wanted to copy her” (Mahfil 172).

It is with such literary backing that she begins to write beautifully crafted and sexually charged short stories such as ‘Gainda’, the infamous ‘Lihaf’ or ‘The Quilt’ for which she was dragged to court on charges of obscenity in 1944. Chughtai refuses to see sexuality as a unified whole as she finds various forms of sexuality including class-centred sexuality. She re-explores her childhood through the wretched, restless narrator of these short stories and the protagonist of her renowned novel *The Crooked Line*– Shamman, an unwanted rebel child of the family. In ‘Gainda’ we see the adolescent girl’s attachment to Gainda the maid, a child-widow, with whom she secretly plays ‘dulhan-dulhan’. The narrator puts forward class difference through the tutored femininity of servant Gainda – her womanly gait, the way she asserts a passive pride over her widow status- in stark contrast with the indelicate ‘child’ the narrator is presented and has the privilege to be. The “strange” discussions the two has, which the maid leads with her treasure trove of stories, against the better knowledge of the rest of the family hints at their attempts to explore sexuality. The narrator is unsettled and feels unwanted as she discovers that her elder brother Bhaiya and are Gainda are sexually involved. This premature exposure to illicit sex is repeated in *The Crooked Line* when Shamman finds Una, the maid for whom the child has lesbian longings, having wild intercourse with her lover in the hay. Chughtai records reflections of class in relation to the sexual attraction between the authoritative Bhaiya and servant Gainda in a closed and sexually segregated Muslim society. In ‘Gainda’ the child’s longing for significance, the desire to be treated as femininely as Bhaiya treats Gainda leads her to obstinately demand

that Mewaram, their gardener, marry her. Chughtai masterfully describes the psychological dislocation of the narrator who is no longer interested in games as she is left contemplating things that are beyond her understanding and her void is soon filled with daydreams of a - 'tiny little bride'. The narrator overcomes her resentment for the inattentive people of her household after a period of absence. Interestingly, after learning that Gainda had her brother's baby, firing the wrath of the narrator's 'noble' family, her senses are greatly flooded with the images of babies.

“That night hundreds of children appeared in my dream. Some of them resembled us-me, Gainda, Bhaiya, even the dead Mewaram. Hundreds of frolicking children-bald heads, heads with hair, round heads, tiny hands. The whole universe teemed with children like countless grains of sand” (Gainda, 12).

The phantasmagoria reveals a resolution through the explosion of the narrator's anxieties and she sees all their offspring as the end result of her tribulations followed by her obsession with becoming a woman which had taken over her in the form of the little brides. Chughtai truthfully captures even the minute of feelings to give voice to her body of existence in defiance to the very limited things she is permitted to express in a suppressive society. She remains true to her experience in the way she designs her narrative which delves into the inner anxieties and past reflections of the obstinate child before her thoughts venture out in the open.

The writer's mind cultivates various identities through the incarnations of their feminine spaces. The diversity of their opposition and reaction to encroachment leads to a better understanding of hegemony and the angles of its affects. The spaces embedded in the poems

or stories by South Asian writers are at times phantasmagorical, politically-charged or descriptive of other apprehensions but they are commonly deployed to release the energy of the author which seeks to materialise itself through expression after facing subjugation.

## Voices of Politics

Foucault defines 'critical attitude' as a virtue and says the core of critique is made of the bundle of relationships that are tied to one another, or one to the two others - power, truth and the subject (32). Women writers in South Asia, pressed for centuries under various struggles, have by portraying them critiqued the phases of politics despite their marginalised states. They write mostly as witnesses - to war, the horror of the Partition that bloodily divided the region's men and women on religious lines or the extraordinary political events that eventually engulfed the puzzled states. Women, believing that women's rights can only be realized in a democratic environment (Basu 18), have written as themselves to express their nationalistic ideals. Hatred and fear of religious extremism gaining ground in their respective countries is important in their criticisms, and some have interpreted scriptures, cited roots or dislodged roots in support of a system closer to humanism. Foucault says it is this art of voluntary insubordination which would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of the 'politics of truth' (32).

Ismat Chughtai in her short story 'Roots' rejects the theory of two nations carved out of one as she encapsulates the 1947 Partition through an old mother and the natural bond her family shared with their Hindu neighbours. She sets the background with the rigmarole of political views with diverse visions regarding the homeland.

“If Abba was a Congresswala, Doctor saheb and Barre bhai were supporters of the league. Gyan Chand was a Mahasabhai while Manjhe bhai was a communist and Gulab Chand a socialist. Women and children supported the party patronised by their husband or father” (Chughtai 129).

Through her own insightful voice Chughtai narrates the growing rift and changing attitudes with the coming of half-dead refugees which began to characterize a deepening divide. The brink that appears is explored through her mother, Amma, who quietly surrenders herself to its isolation by holding on to her ground in horror and refusing to adopt an alien destination even at the risk of being murdered by a mob. Her body and the motherland becomes one and her physical attachment to it is dramatised with the image of her children's buried umbilical cords.

“Ten images of flesh and blood – ten human beings were born in that hallowed room from the sacred womb which they left behind that day. They had left her hung in thorns like an old snake-slough and made good their escape” (Chughtai 136)

The taciturn mother rejects as abnormality the idea of severing age-old ties for the sake of an exclusive Muslim identity. Helplessly she watches her children leave for the security of a distant land when Chughtai ushers in the critical solution through neighbour Roopchandji whose very existence begins to reel under a collective guilt which leads him to act as patron and take responsibility of his neighbours along with their fates and unite them with his own. Chughtai reverses the effect of Partition and retains the truth of transcending unity against the political legitimacies of discord.

The mother again appears to symbolise through her vulnerabilities the violence of Partition in Kishwar Naheed's poem 'A palace of wax'. Born in Bulandshahr in India's Uttar Pradesh, the poet witnessed rape and abduction of women as chasms opened to form of two nations. With this violence hanging, the women of Naheed's poem lie down to sleep in vulnerability

and have nightmares which are so graphic that she is unable to recall them in the morning (Pandit 4). The mother afflicts her daughter with the trauma of having to protect their female bodies during chaos.

“Before I ever married

my mother

used to have

nightmares.

Her fearful screams shook me

I would wake her, ask her

'What happened?'

Blank-eyed she would stare at me.

She couldn't remember her dreams.

One day a nightmare woke her

but she did not scream

She held me tight in silent fear

I asked her

'What happened?'

She opened her eyes and thanked the heavens

'I dreamt that you were drowning'.

She said,

'And I jumped into the river to save you'.

That night she lightning

killed our buffalo and my fiance.



Then one night my mother slept  
And I stayed up  
Watching her open and shut her fist  
She was trying to hold on to something  
Failing, and willing herself to hold on again.

I woke her  
But she refused to tell me her dream.

Since that day  
I have not slept soundly.  
I moved to the other courtyard.

Now I and my mother both scream  
through our nightmares.

And if someone asks us  
we just tell them  
we can't remember our dreams" (Naheed 4).

An array of muffled anxieties, images of death emerge between the narrator and her traumatised mother as they share the brutalised condition as Partition is completed. The buffalo and her fiancé are lost in the distance to a lightning, which Pandit argues is a release of pent up masculine energy released by the coloniser's policy of 'divide and rule'. The true marker of religion in moments of extreme identity anxiety (usually riots) has been the

physical exhibition of the penis. (4). Violence acted as the crossing between the community and its new national territory and the stress of the fearful visions render the women mute. Spivak says it is an attempt by a subaltern at self-representation which listeners have failed to recognise since does not fit into a known definition of representation (qtd. In Pandit 4).

Tehmina Durrani represents a later generation in Pakistan. She admits she is 'conventional' but provides a most harrowing expose of Pakistan's politics and prejudices with herself as both the lowly punching bag and the useful political protégé of her second husband, the Punjab politician, Mustafa Khar. He is the title of her autobiography, *The Feudal Lord*, rightly subtitled - 'A devastating indictment of women's role in Muslim society' - provides gruelling images of her sufferings in the hands of Mustafa. Delved in confusion, Durrani repeatedly marks her oppressor as 'strong and powerful' as she divides her memory between the political and personal intrigues they shared. There exists a dichotomy in her ethics which allows her to conveniently separate the inhumanity she inexhaustibly notices in Mustafa from his national image – the Lion of Punjab (251). She is proud to be associated with him for his 'great political mind' but at the same time terrified of his feudally-bred, cruel temperament. Durrani represents a class of elites of who she portrays as keeping dual identities by being outwardly anglicised while retaining coarse feudal conventions. In her eagerness to transform from an abused female to an empowered individual being she retains the political fallacies embedded in her country's headstrong political culture that had enslaved her like the other more disadvantaged women. A form of inbred intolerance is seen when at India's Azmer Sharif she feels her Muslim prayers were being disturbed by the presence of her Hindu bodyguards and finds comfort in the hums of other Muslims in prayer (233). She aligns her 'political' self to female head of states including Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi but criticises her for insulting Muslims by celebrating Bangladesh's emergence as a secular state

after secession from Pakistan, which she, like many in her country, held was an outcome of India's policing in the region. Durrani's damaged ego and the inability to access a more rounded perspective of the region's history, lead her to 'privately disagree' with her husband's faith on India despite her record of agreeing with most of his political views. "Raised to be schizophrenic" (29), she unites with her oppressors, whether it is the army or her husband, a type of selective dependency Immanuel Kant described as "self-incurred tutelage" - the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another (qtd. in Foucault 3). She however does stress on how her interpretation of Quran varied from Mustafa and her mother and does the 'unthinkable' task of presenting the verses in her own light.

"A woman was like a man's land – 'The Koran says so,' he said. This was a revealing simile. A feudal lord loves his land only in functional terms. He encloses it and protects it. If it is barren, he neglects it. Land is power, prestige property. I interpreted the Koran differently. To me land had to be tendered and cultivated; only then could it produce in abundance" (Durrani 107)

But whatever the horror of the author's personal life with her husband, the most oppressive presence besides her mother, she continued to detach her everyday defeats from her 'political will' centred solely on Mustafa and his duties to the people of Pakistan. To her, abandoning him meant turning her back towards his crowd of followers stricken with poverty. Durrani says she felt dull without his masculine intensity and also admits to being "the false woman who acts as a servant to the militant male and prevents the live one from breathing" (Cixous, K. Cohen and P Cohen 7). But she nevertheless breaks her society's tradition of silence to put

forward the truth behind the political rhetoric in her effort to diagnose the feudal value system which privileges the archetypal male chauvinist.

The rejection of hegemony by Taslima Nasrin has related her to Bangladesh as a veritable taboo within the realm of its national politics. No government so far have dared to take responsibility of the stigmatized author, in exile since 1994, nor did they aid her to return home. Her columns take the form of confessionals, debate and reflections through which her infallible loneliness permeates. The experience of being disowned is reflected in her criticism of the manner with which how fellow Bangladeshis who maintain that abuses on women are ultimate and the victims unacceptable. She accuses the nation of being shameless in lacking the human will to redefine rape which constituted a disturbingly overwhelming part of the War of Independence as more than 600,000 women were raped in nine months of war. In a column from her collection titled ‘Jabo na keno? Jabo’, Nasrin, who was nine when the Liberation War began, recalls Pakistani soldiers’ who had entered their home and was guessing her age while she pretended to be asleep. The men who ‘spoke and laughed bizarrely’ deemed her too young before turning their attention to looting. Their presence, she said, had turned her to stone. Up until now she feels the terror in the form of a cold snake - the soldiers’ phalluses climbing her motionless body. She says the struggle for liberation has been lessened because despite the collective misfortune of war those who emerged out of it were unforgivable to the young girls and women who were raped by the enemy. She says liberation despite all its glory has failed to set a new horizon for abused women.

“Amra potaka uriyechi thiki, amader desh theke utko borbor-  
der dur korechi thiki kintu shomajer noshto o nongra shogskar  
dur korte parini – je shongskar ekattorer kono ottyacharito  
torunike khoma koreni ebong dirgho kuri bochor por akhono  
tader khoma korar khomota orjon koreni” (Nasrin 169).<sup>4</sup>

The security of the female body which contributes to her identity is a central focus of the author in her criticism of power and she stresses on its absence in 'Bangali Narir Ekal Shekal', one of her columns written in exile. She says women do not possess the phallus and ties its absence to the torment she faces throughout her life. She has no state because she is offered no security by her family, society and their country - Bangladesh has scrapped only a handful of its misogynist practices as a bid to appear civilised. She adds that Bengali women cannot claim to be proud of her ethnic history and culture because for them it is not a flowing river but a stagnant pool of misogynist views. Nasrin, to convey her truth against the desire to neutralise the female within cultural symbols, asks women to reconstruct their Bengali identities and advises them to violate rules and be the sources of disturbance, in line with the authors of 'The Laugh of the Medusa' who asserted that women claim their bodies, resist death and make trouble (Cixous, K. Cohen and P Cohen 3).

Women through their writings have come to confront various forms of government which Foucault says stipulates obedience. In this framework, "critique means putting forth universal and infeasible rights to which every government, whatever it may be, whether a monarch, a magistrate, an educator or a pater familias, will have to submit (30). Pakistan's Fahmida Riaz who for her work remains in the centre of controversies says a South Asian writer has had to write politically because "things have been so bad that [s/he] could not ignore them" (dawn.com). The female authors' provide a myriad of windows to the angst, repressed fear women have endured under the brunt of the political discord which had taken over their physical realities. Through attentive recalling of past violence and an engagement in political narrative the women authors take the position of 'the subject' within Foucault's 'bundle of

4. We have flown our flag, we have fought off savages from our land but we could not get rid of the rotten customs of society – the customs that could not absolve the girl abused in 1971, and it still does not have the courage to do so after twenty long years.

relationship'. The subject, Foucault argues, gives herself the right to "question power on its discourses of truth" when it seeks to bind the subject within a total, meticulous, detailed relationship of obedience. (30)

## Conclusion

The voices of femininity charged with experience are recorded by the writers who emit out their identities rebellion, dissent and discord with power which remains guarded by the various arms of patriarchy be it religion or misdemeanour. The women have responded to the subjugation by making their inner spaces known through images embedded with a myriad of personal yet deeply collective symbols. Confinement gives rise to a number of actions within the female subject of patrimony in the context of a South Asian Muslim identity.

The nature of extreme censorship imposed on the women of Pakistan have led Naheed and Riaz ,to attach in their politically-charged feminist poems, highly fantasised representations of the collective female body and also just their own body. Their own representations are therefore assigned to serve in their cause. Nasrin on the other hand describes in her wide volume of opinions and observations the persecution of women by male relatives, neighbours, strangers, employers and even members of the law-enforcing agencies in Bangladesh (Hashmi 2). The diffused and ever-present threats men pose to a female's autonomy saturates her writings in the form of angry and perceptive monologues. Her criticisms are directed to every facet of the phallic culture which seeing through Nasrin's lenses manifests itself in form of customs, traditions, crime and insensibilities.

Chughtai however offers her tightly-woven fiction to capture the unabashed female intensity because of the vehement hate she has for artificiality and hypocrisy of the romantic tradition in Urdu literature. "You should not be afraid of expressing it, for the heart is more sacred than the lips." she tells Mahfil (171). Through her characteristic frankness she transcends all taboos with both her curiosity and conviction. She exhibits a wider space as

opposed to the Pakistani poets who are seen to be more occupied in their rebellion against the misogynist tradition of their Islamised nation which also rings true in the works by the authors from Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Foucault's definition of criticism as 'Politics of Truth', characterises the reactions to patriarchal reality and continues to form a large part of the South Asian Muslim women writer's discourse with power.

In the absence of a definite threshold, her collective essence is therefore found against the horizon she herself portrays. She emerges out of the immanence to echo those around her – the masses of underprivileged female bodies and their oppressors.



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