

Simmering Silences of the Subdued Second Sex : A Study of Women Characters in Tasneem Khan's Eh Mere Rehnuma

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Indian middle-class women have always had a raw deal at the hands of the patriarchal society in which they live. They have always been the submissive 'other' trapped in the traditional society which has two different rules for men and women. Very rarely have they achieved their due, always working silently behind the scenes, braving the oppressive customs and narrow mindsets of the hyper-dominant other. From being considered a commodity, a sex-object, the second sex, unpaid house-help, a woman has, more often than not, been a mute spectator confined within the domestic sphere. Tasneem Khan has brought to the fore the plight of millions of such women and exposed the rot of the society threadbare in a style which neither comments nor judges, but simply lays bare their struggles and exploitations. She leaves it to her readers to draw their own conclusions. The writer

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in her challenges the social and cultural constructs of gender through her writings, giving voice to this muted gender. The violence perpetrated against them, their complete lack of awareness of their own status and rights, their commodification in the socio-domestic sphere, their muted struggles, their angst and anguish and the alternate lives that they are forced to lead are some of the issues that this article focusses on with a special reference to her novel, Eh, Mere Rehnuma that had been shortlisted for the Bhartiya Jnanpith's Navlekhan Award for the year 2016.

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1. Introduction

Literature is a mirror of society. Through its various forms of art, fiction, poetry, it reflects the prevalent social and culture ethos, reiterating the need to understand issues that have been festering since times immemorial, impacting the evolution of society. It stirs many a mind's eye to look within, ponder, analyze and expose the injustices that have got entrenched in its social fabric. Literature acquaints readers with contentious issues, enabling them to ponder over solutions. Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, writes about how "the family plays an important role in creating a hierarchical system and keeping order in society. The family not merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order" (Bhasin, 10).

One of the feminist agendas has been to interrogate the projection and portrayal of women in literature. Not only their speeches but their silences too become significant, revealing the existence of hierarchy in language and discourse. One becomes aware of the gradual process of socialization that takes place wherein dominant ideas and values get internalized by men and women alike as they continue to pick socially and culturally acceptable behaviour and perpetuate them to successive generations. The normalisation of patriarchy in our society is a consequence of this very process wherein men not only get to play the dominant role but also have a stronghold over all the powerful resources, decision making and ideology. Literature offers instances of exploitation, discrimination and violence inflicted upon women within the circle of a family.

The leitmotif of the paper is to bring to the centre stage the simmering voices and equally seething silences of the muted gender that have been crushed under the patriarchal yoke since time immemorial. This theme has been written about often, but as long as

the 'second sex' continues to face exploitation, it shall never lose its relevance. Their marginalization begins when they are still in an embryonic stage. They find their way into this world unwanted and unwelcomed but still with a tenacity to survive against all odds.

2. Literature Review

There is plenty of literature that has been written about the plight and status of Muslim women in India. Khan, S. (2018) also explores how multiple forms of oppression, including gender, race, religion, and class, intersect to marginalize and suppress their voices, and highlights strategies of resistance and empowerment. Rehman, T., & Ahmad, F. (2018) discuss the crucial role of patriarchy, religious norms, and socio-economic factors in shaping the experiences of Muslim women. The educational experiences of Muslim women and their silencing in public spaces have been the focus of Nasir, N. (2020). Nivedita Menon in "Seeing Like a Feminist" (2012) and Shabnam Hashmi in "Voices from within: Stories of Muslim Women" (2018) examine the impact of traditional and cultural practices such as early marriage, limited educational opportunities, restricted mobility, and social stigma on the lives of women. In "The Plight of Muslim Women in India: A Review of Empirical Studies", Khan, S. (2020) critically analyses empirical studies on the challenges faced by Muslim women in India. The work explores the intersectionality of gender and religious identity and provides insights into the socio-cultural, economic and educational aspects of their lives.

These literature reviews provide varied perspectives on the intersectionality of gender, religion, racism, and power dynamics about Muslim women in India, offering valuable insights into the socio-cultural and religious aspects of how and why Muslim women are forced to remain silent and toe the patriarchal line. They facilitate a more comprehensive understanding behind the silences of womenfolk as they grapple against the age-old traditional mindset of male dominance.

The entire life of womenfolk is regulated by the all-powerful patriarchs whose word is a kind of unwritten law which needs to be adhered to by all the family members. There is very little room for negotiation. More often than not, this very patronage becomes counterproductive owing to the larger-than-life ego of the male that

turns him myopic and parochial and he fails to empathize with the plight of his female counterpart. In this paper, I have tried to examine the plight of female characters in Tasneem Khan's debut novel, *Eh Mere Rehnuma*, that had been shortlisted for the Navlekhan award by the Bhartiya Jnanpith in the year 2016. The novel challenges the patriarchal mindset of the Muslim world in a very poignant manner. It has been translated into English by Jyotika Elhance as *Oh, These Rehnumas!*, which also was equally well-received at its launch at the prestigious Jaipur Literature Festival in 2022.

3. Silencing of the Subdued Sex

Eh Mere Rehnuma is the story of Taha Akhtar, a young journalist. Although she belongs to an upwardly mobile, progressive family and has married the man with whom she has fallen in love, yet she still has to fight against all odds to keep her identity alive. She has devoted her entire life to carve out a niche for herself in the world dominated by menfolk. She has taken upon herself not only to motivate and inspire other girls of her own community who have been holed up in the inner recesses of their lives, but also to encourage them to take up cudgels against the narrow-mindedness of the outside world and recover their agency. She advises,

Take the reins of your life in your own hands. Empower yourself. The first step towards it is financial freedom.... A lot of problems would be automatically taken care of. There'd be neither the shackles of patriarchy nor its accompanying violence... women have been at the receiving end of all atrocities because they have been kept financially weak and dependent on menfolk (Elhance, 12).

Taha had a silver tongue; she could weave magic with her words and inspire others but appearances could be very deceptive. The reality of her life was at complete variance with what she advocated. Her life was mired in controversy, she was exploited physically, psychologically and financially by the man of her dreams - her husband who had stopped making any efforts to earn a livelihood. Despite the fact that she herself was financially independent, she was forced to tolerate all his eccentricities and violent tirades and still keep up the appearances of being happily married for the world around. It wasn't long before it began to take a heavy toll on her personal life and she began to sink in the same

quagmire in her journey towards self-realization. She who had dared to toll the bell against the regressive mindset that lay crushed for centuries, found herself in the very same *cul de sac*.

Hélène Cixous, French feminist writer and theorist, opines that women would feel liberated from patriarchal definition and subjugation if they are able to write from their bodies.

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetoric, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence', the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'the end' (Cixous, 886).

It would make them aware of their core being and help them to express all that has been denied to them. They would be able to realize their sexuality and access their inner strength that has been suppressed. The journalist in Taha attempted to do that. She tried to spread awareness about the dismal plight of womenfolk through her articles and speeches, arousing them to militate against the established order. She tried to inspire them to take control of their lives in their own hands, but despite her best efforts failed miserably in her own personal life which was completely at odds with her professional life wherein she could not prevent herself from being exploited and arm-twisted by her husband, Zeeshan at every stage.

Most women are trapped in a patriarchal setup and find themselves completely at the mercy of the hyper-dominant other. They have absolutely no say in what they want to do or when they want to do it. Their lives are more often than not regulated by their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons. Their rights and freedom are illusory. They never get handed to them on a platter. There are always plenty of 'ifs' and 'buts' that come in their way. Taha challenges this very parochial mindset and forces her readers to shed their veneer of complacency. She wants the readers to question and raise awareness about women's silences. For silences too can be deafening. Silence has a language of its own which needs to be understood in its totality. Khan uses these silences as a potent weapon to delve into the psyche of the female protagonists in the

novel. Through them the women's responses and reactions towards the male hegemony are assessed. It is only the marginalized and subalterns who are denied a 'voice' and are silenced. Autonomy, freedom, liberty, voice, choice, options, rights etc., are alien words that have no presence in their dictionary.

Women do not even have a right over their own bodies. Tasneem Khan explores this aspect through a significant portrayal of another suppressed woman in the novel. Nazma is married at a tender age of fifteen to her own cousin brother who is a complete alcoholic and a wastrel. In all her naivety, she mistakenly comes to regard marital rape to which she is subjected every night and which leaves her badly battered, both physically and psychologically, as a form of her husband's love for her. The so-called all-protective upbringing that had been imposed upon this young starry-eyed girl had turned her into a marionette who dances to the whims and fancies of the males in her life. She wanted to go to school and study further like her brothers but Abba put his foot down authoritatively for he was of the opinion that too much of education only leads young girls astray.

It isn't good for her to venture outside. And since she is a girl, she wouldn't have to go out to earn a livelihood. Then where is the need to send her to school? Besides, we have no desire to live off her money...And how would we be able to find a right match for her if she becomes over qualified? The groom and his family are more interested in a domesticated bride who is docile and uneducated (Elhance, 30).

As Helen Cixous says, women are passed over as possessions from their fathers to their husbands and in doing so they derive a sense of power and authority. Nazma's plight was no different. The young teenager blindly followed the dictates of her father, doing things that were dictated to her. She wasn't in the least aware of the fact that she had been turned into an automaton. She became so used to conforming to his directives that the merest thought of living a day as per her own wishes gave her goosebumps. A pawn she had become - a pawn whose every move was controlled and manipulated by her father. He was her *rehnuma*, her guardian angel; and she was in utter awe of him. His word was her command. Her entire being, her thought structure, her existence, her psychology got superseded and compromised at his hands. The right to her own identity was

taken away from her the very day that she came into this world. She was never given any voice. At a very tender age, he handed her a *burka* to cover her body for he didn't want her beauty to become the talk of the town. She wasn't allowed to step out of the house alone. Even if she had to attend any social functions like a marriage etc., she'd be accompanied by her mother and that too under a *burka*.

Women's mobility, their dressing, their behaviour, their expressions are all monitored by the code of conduct imposed upon them by the male order. They are restricted to the inner quarters of the house and are not allowed to interact freely with outside world, kept under *pardah/burka*, denied the right to education and earning a livelihood. Promiscuity in women is considered a taboo but is considered normal when it comes to men by laughing it off as "Boys will be boys." Therefore, it is not surprising that Nazma's husband, Wasim's sexual escapades are never questioned.

She knew it was pointless to resist. For if she did, he'd fight with her and get physically violent. She had no strength left to take any more of his beatings. So, she surrendered meekly to the situation.

She had honed the art of reconciliation very early in life. Frightened as she was of Abba, she had learnt to compromise with various things to meet his approval. And today too, that acquired flair had enabled her to keep her household together very prudently.

In her own heart of hearts, she was grateful to her father for making her the kind of person that she had become, saying, 'if you hadn't imposed all those restrictions on me, I wouldn't have been able to live through this suppression'.

It was difficult to say whether she was actually indebted to him or was dismayed with his upbringing (Elhance, 86).

Sylvia Walby in her book, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), calls it "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (20-21). There has been a systematic "othering" of female sex through various systems, practices, notions that project men and women as naturally different, men are stronger and women weaker, their physiology is geared for different societal roles. The superior status accorded to menfolk provides them with all the controls wherein they regard and treat womenfolk as their

property. Both Nazma and her mother suffer an identical life-journey in that house and that was dancing to the tune of Abba's whims. Both of them toe the same line of total capitulation, never raising their voice or questioning his dictates even once throughout the course of the novel.

The only thing that Nazma was fond of in the entire house was her birdcage wherein she kept some birds. There wasn't any difference between her plight and that of her pet birds; both seemed content in their cages. Like them she too was oblivious of the fact that there existed a real life that was beautiful and carefree and she blindly followed the dictates of her father. As a result, she got so accustomed to her *burka* that she fell in love with it and could not fathom a life without it. *Burka* and the other associated curbs that were imposed upon her, became an integral part of her life. Even when she went shopping with her mother, her eyes were always on a look-out for *burkas* of latest styles. Her Abba also never showed any reservations about her splurging money on them. "Obviously, how could he have put any restriction on restriction itself" (Elhance, 33).

Women have learnt how to renegotiate and bargain power, many a times at the cost of others of their own kind. They have internalised these patriarchal values to such an extent that they have no qualms about perpetrating the same violence upon other helpless women and exerting control on their reproductivity. The conformists are rewarded through praises and appreciations whereas the non-conformists are castigated and looked down upon. Nazma is branded as a "barren woman" by her mother-in-law when she fails to conceive at that tender age. The mother-in-law is, in fact, shamelessly unrepentant about getting a second bride for her son as she bellows at Nazma's father, "Wasim hasn't divorced your daughter that you walk in and demand an answer from us" (Elhance, 91).

4. Women have no right on their own Bodies

Under the guise of traditional wedlock, both Taha and Nazma find themselves completely crushed by the toxic masculinity that has taken control of their lives. They forgo the right on their own bodies, on their own sexualities since it is guided and manoeuvred by the menfolk. It gets compounded many times over if the woman is illiterate, uneducated or poor. The plight of the upper-class women is not much different either. "The entire night she was pounced upon and treated like a plaything by her husband and by the time it

was morning, every pore of her body felt sore. She who had fantasized about these tender moments all her life, couldn't believe how painful they'd turn out to be in reality. Her head began to throb" (Elhance, 75).

Different kinds of violence are perpetrated upon women in order to control and subjugate them. According to Sylvia Walby, "Male violence constitutes a further structure despite its apparently individualistic and diverse form. It is a behaviour routinely experienced by women from men. Male violence is systematically condoned and legitimised by the state's refusal to intervene against it except in exceptional instances" (Walby, 21).

Marital rape is the husband's way of expressing anger, power, dominance, control over his spouse wherein the woman does not have the right to refuse sex because that has been reinforced time and again upon her by the dominant culture. Such a culture also perpetuates stereotypes and myths that women enjoy forced sex and that they mean "yes" when they say "no". Giving in to those stereotypes, man indulges in violence and coercion, completely oblivious of the resultant trauma upon the female body. The physical body heals over a period of time but the scars of the psyche go very deep. The sense of mutual trust, intimacy, camaraderie that a marriage is supposed to be built upon, gets sacrificed at the altar of such violence and abuse. The wife feels betrayed, humiliated and traumatized. Her sense of self-worth and confidence get shattered and she is never able to rear her head.

Whether the act of forced sex upon one's wife comes under marital rape or not has oft been debated. British jurist, Sir Matthew Hale had made a statement in his book, *The History of the Pleas of the Crown*, that was published in the year 1736 that read, "But the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract" (Hale, 628). Does that mean that by giving her consent to marriage, a woman has handed over her body on a platter to her husband? Does that mean that he has her irrevocable consent for having sexual intercourse with him? Not much seems to have changed over the last two centuries. Unfortunately, marital rape hasn't yet been criminalized in India. Even now, what is known as "marital rape exception", under Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code

exempts a man from the offence of rape, even if he has forceful intercourse with his wife provided the wife is above fifteen years of age. This actually means that the act is permissible if the woman is above fifteen and married and that she forgoes her right to protect her body when she enters into a marriage contract.

5. Conclusion

Women comprise half of the world's population. They need to be equally empowered so as to keep their sense of self-worth alive and that will happen only when men lend a helping hand and play a supportive role. It would happen when they are taught right from their childhood days to respect women as their equals. Women too need to be made aware of their own rights and duties, need to be educated to stand for themselves, respect themselves and not tolerate any injustice meted out to them. The society is gradually inching towards a positive change also due to the vocal and vociferous awareness generated through the efforts of various NGOs, social media campaigns, government efforts etc., but still, it's a long tedious uphill journey ahead.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*, writes,

On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself - on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger. In the meantime, love represents in its most touching form the curse that lies heavily upon woman confined in the feminine universe, woman mutilated, insufficient unto herself (Beauvoir, 63). We await, with hope, for that day to dawn.

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