

WOMANHOOD IN PAKISTAN: ROLE OF NATIONALISM, ISLAM, AND COLONIAL LEGACY

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Abstract - The common perception of the main root of coercion against women in Pakistan is Islam. Resultantly, the colonial inheritance depicted in identity of Pakistan in form of social, cultural, and political reality is disregarded. Therefore, it becomes significant to study the formulation of Islamic culture of Pakistan under the umbrella of nationalism, as a form of colonial legacy, to explicate the image of 'subjugated women of Pakistan'. This paper argues, the concept of 'oppressed Pakistani women' is not a mere result of Islamic authority, as portrayed globally. Rather, this image is based on very complex overarching concepts of kinship, ethnic and tribal identities derived from colonial legacies, and political recognitions. In short, the article negates the reduction of the image of 'oppressed women of Pakistan' to Islamic concept of gender relations; thus, maintains, womanhood in Pakistan as not a representative of only Islamic culture. For, Islamization, and womanhood are flourished in complex cultural discourse of nationalism with underpinnings of colonial legacy. It is further explored in the paper that how the binaries resulted during the process of colonization, along with the project of nationalism divides and defines the gender roles, and turns woman into the symbol of piety, honor, and submission.

Key Words - Women of Pakistan, Colonial Legacy, Islam, Nationalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture and religion are equally held responsible for the oppression against women in Orient societies. In case of Pakistan, the religion is considered the main responsible cause of coercion against femininity; accordingly, the portrayal of Pakistani women as an oppressed being is mostly associated with the political Islamization. Thus, it is argued that the relevant practices associated with the Islamic ideology promotes Islamic forms of patriarchy;¹ because, the legitimate reason for existence of Pakistan is Islam.² Hence, it is presumed that religion has overpowered the culture in Pakistan. Despite Islam being a widely-accepted reason of creation of Pakistan; its recognition as a postcolonial country cannot be detached from its identity, depicted in its social, cultural, and political reality as an impression of colonial inheritance. Therefore, in order to explicate the 'concept of women' it becomes significant to study the formulation of Islam and culture of Pakistan under the umbrella of nationalism as a form of colonial legacy. In short, the image of 'subjugated women of Pakistan' is not as simple the result of Islamic authority the way it is portrayed globally; rather, this image is based on very complex overarching concepts of kinship, ethnic and tribal identities, colonial legacies, and political recognitions.³ Therefore, the paper is an attempt to explore the concept of women, as a form of gender relations, emerging from the complexities and overarching trajectories related to a specific kind of Islamization in Pakistan, which is a form of colonial legacy and nationalism. It is argued in the paper that the image of Pakistani women cannot be merely reduced to process of Islamization; for it is a result of colonial context founded on the regional and cultural tradition of the pre-partition colonized society. The article further explores that the

concept of women emerged from these complexities is not a single dimensional representation; rather there are multiple concepts of women hood which are developed within the discourse of 'colonial legacy and nationalism' taking place in Pakistan.

II. COLONIAL LEGACY OF BINARIES; INFLUENCE ON RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL CULTURE - THE FOUNDATION FOR EDIFICE OF NATIONALISM

The colonial past transformed both the ideologies of religion and traditional culture in Pakistan through oriental interpretation, as a result, various social binaries emerged. These binaries, as a form of a colonial legacy, significantly influenced the construction of nationalism, and are observed in the society of Pakistan. The very first colonial legacy in form of 'binary of differentiation between west and east' coined the concept of 'otherness' and made West a nation distinct from the eastern society. Any ideology belonging to east was made dissimilar to the West; thus, the religious binary emerged in form of 'Islam versus Christian West', as a religion of colonized and colonizer. This binary didn't limit itself to the power relations of dominant-suppressed groups; rather, fragmented the conquered local society into two different communities based on their religions; i.e. Islam and Hinduism. The binaries of difference and religion took form of racial binary that classified people of west belonging to the superior race when compared to the people of East. All these binaries were grounded on the relationship established on the binaries of colonized and colonizer in terms of oppressed and oppressor. These binaries strengthened the structures created by colonial dissimilarities; hence, together these binaries may be called as structural binaries. As a result, the local structures that helped to maintain colonial legacy were further fortified; like, the traditional culture of hierarchical caste system derived from the Hindu culture or the class

¹ Zia, Afiya Shehrbano. "The Reinvention of Feminism in Pakistan." *Feminist Review*, no. 91 (2009): 29-46.

² Pal, Izzud-Din. "Women and Islam in Pakistan." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 449-64.

³ Shaheed, Farida. "Contested Identities: gendered politics, gendered religion in Pakistan." *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 6 (2010): 851-867.

⁴ Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "The Orientalization of Gender," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 4 (2005): 26-56

system influenced by the colonizer-colonized relationship; as well as, the concept of traditional seclusion and segregation between gender to preserve the class difference, social status, and the concept of modesty⁵ were sustained through these binaries. All these binaries penetrated the relations of local inhabitants; as a result, a binary emerged in gender relations through Oriental representation of colonized men and women. Local eastern men were presented by colonizer as villains and barbaric, who are traders in women bodies; whereas, indigenous women were Orientally presented as passive and meek individual, that is unable to raise her voice.⁶ The meek impression of women was associated merely to the colonized women; though imperial women were inferior to imperial man, but was superior to her colonized counterpart. For imperial women knew her rights and the colonial world presented itself like a lab to them for the experimentation to picture their feministic ideas.⁷ In short, the western women were exposed to the public sphere where they could show their ability of performing equal role like western male counterparts⁸. The colonized, especially the Muslim colonized, suffered double from these binaries; in the similar context, because the women, as an underprivileged group, suffered the most in form of triple colonization⁹; therefore, Muslim women were the most deprived group, for they served as an oppressed colonized, a depressed Muslim, and a suppressed woman.

The reality of women, as destitute, remained the same even after decolonization; because the project of nationalism in constructing the identity of Pakistan is erected on the bedrock of colonial binaries as a legacy, apparent in the social, political and cultural institutions of Pakistan; along with Islamic ideology and cultural tradition of the region. It is widely accepted by postcolonial scholarship that the complete project of colonization, decolonization and nation building is a masculine project¹⁰. Therefore, the concept of project of nationalism of Pakistan has also masculine overtones; regardless of the feminine image of nation which provides a terrain where cultural signifier, in form of women's body, can be highlighted¹¹. The masculine control and the feminist image in the process of nationalism converted women as a symbol, that was built on the already existing symbolic forms of women. For women in Islamic tradition were considered as 'symbols of stability and purity'¹² because of their piety which is thought much more than external appearance, still is reflected through the

practice of segregation and veil; in traditional culture of pre-partition, the influence of caste and tribal customs¹³ framed women as symbol of honor¹⁴ which is not limited to the practice of veil only, rather it includes the social practices, constituting around the concept of concealment responsible for constructing the ethics of community¹⁵. As a result, the romantic imagery of women is created which not only portrays her as a feminine and helpless being¹⁶, but also built the strong, admired masculine image of men. The gender binary resulted in conflicting image of the gender as a colonial legacy is pronounced in project of nationalism; thus, made concept of Pakistani men as adversary to the notion of Pakistani women. Accordingly, all these symbolic representations of women along with 'colonial women as symbol of passivity and submissiveness' instituted Pakistani women as a 'symbol of national culture' to help in reinforcing their roles through dress, behavior and affiliations.¹⁷

III. POLITICAL ISLAMIZATION AND CONCEPT OF WOMAN - FROM SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION TO PHYSICAL REPRESENTATION OF APPEARANCE

This symbolic representation further got transformed into the physical representation, making appearance a signifier of certain type of women. This new form of representation was fashioned by two conflicting ideological groups, illustrating bifurcated society of Pakistan, which participated in formation of a nation; as a subsequent result after the independence. The first belonged to the western educated elite of Pakistan, who appreciated the legacy of colonial binary in terms of class difference and are classified as 'orient' first then a 'man'¹⁸. This group allowed women to participate in political activities to advance the strengthening of nation-state within the described parameters of patriarchal state.¹⁹ In other words, women could materialize their freedom and political presence, along with permission to contest the prescribed dress code and behavioral conduct, without challenging the patriarchal principles on which nation-state was formed. The other group which opposed the colonial legacy and envisioned the nation of Pakistan as contrary to the ideals of West belonged to the Islamic groups²⁰ or the nationalist; though their ideals are also in line with the colonial legacy of binaries in form of west versus Islam/Pakistan; nevertheless, this binary was intended to fight British

⁵Alvi, Anjum. "Concealment and Revealment: The Muslim Veil in Context." *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 2 (2013): 177-99.

⁶ Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "The Orientalization of Gender," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 4 (2005): 26-56

⁷ Battle-Sister, A. "Conjectures on the Female Culture Question." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 33, no. 3 (1971): 411-420. p.414.

⁸ Durba Ghosh, "Gender and Colonialism: Expansion or Marginalization?" *The Historical Journal* 4, no. 3 (2004): 737-55.

⁹ Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "The Orientalization of Gender," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 4 (2005): 26-56,

¹⁰ This is pointed by number of scholars like Edward said, Frantz Fanon and Spivak in their work about Orientalism and post-colonial studies.

¹¹ Silva, Neluka. "Shameless Women: Repression and Resistance in We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry." *Meridians* 3, no. 2 (2003): 28-51.

¹² Bradley, Tamsin, and Rubina Saigol. "Religious values and beliefs and education for women in Pakistan." *Development in Practice* 22, no. 5-6 (2012): 675-688.

¹³Pal, Izzud-Din. "Women and Islam in Pakistan." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 449-64.

¹⁴Silva, Neluka. "Shameless Women: Repression and Resistance in We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry." *Meridians* 3, no. 2 (2003): 28-51.

¹⁵Alvi, Anjum. "Concealment and Revealment: The Muslim Veil in Context." *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 2 (2013): 177-99.

¹⁶Pal, Izzud-Din. "Women and Islam in Pakistan." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 449-64.

¹⁷Ahmad, Sadaf. "Al-huda: Of Allah and the power point" In *Islam and society in Pakistan: anthropological perspectives*, edited by Magnus Marsden, 299-326. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ Ibid p 231

¹⁹ Ansari, Sarah. "Polygamy, Purdah and political representation: Engendering citizenship in 1950s Pakistan." *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 06 (2009): 1421-1461.

²⁰ Ahmad, Irfan. "Cracks in the 'Mightiest Fortress': Jamaat-e-Islami's Changing Discourse on Women." *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2/3 (2008): 549-75.

attributes and norms by bestowing Muslim identity²¹ to the people of Pakistan. This ideological binary, derived from the religion, appeared as an offspring of colonial binaries; serving as underpinnings on which very existence of Pakistan, as an Islamic state, is grounded. Henceforth, dividing a colonized land into two different religious states. For this reason, within cultural context of Pakistan, the values which belong to west no matter share the similar boundaries with Islamic value system are ignored based on the binary of 'Islam versus West'²² created by Oriental approach of colonizer, as well as, by Islamic clerics of pre-partition era. For example, even if any religious scholar has studied from west is not considered authentic Islamic intellectual; because of its lack in religious scholarship from the indigenously recognized Islamic scholars and schools²³. Consequentially, it becomes central to elaborate the colonial heritages of the process of political Islamization, a foundation of nationalism, and its relationship with the gender roles in Pakistan which shape the deprived illustration of women in society. It was the political authority of Zia²⁴'s regime that allowed only certain type of Islamic thought to flourish as a dominating religious discourse²⁵. Institutionalized Islamic practices in Pakistan, like all other the institutions constructed after the period of decolonization are designed on the same patterns as of the colonizer. Hence, these institutions are not meant to produce equality, rather, to produce binaries based on inequalities to promote interest of the elite²⁶. In short Islamization in Pakistan, and pertinent practices regarding gender relations, is one of such types of institutions which has maintained the colonial binary of oppressor and oppressed; though the oppressed-oppressor roles in gender relations are replaced by the gender groups of men-women. The representation of women was also derived out of the difference in the binary of colonized and colonizer, and the binary of imperial and colonized women. The binary was based on practices that were couched in certain Islamic dispositions, which belonged to the elite Muslim scholars and classes of that time, who could access to the other political parties as well as public. Political Islamization in Pakistan maintained the Islamic interpretation of colonial binaries along with maintaining the traditional culture of segregation and veil for women, a convergence of Hinduism and Islamic social practices²⁷. The post-colonized woman was garbed in an image which was different from the colonizer woman who was visible in public domain and played roles similar to opposite gender. Thus, the Pakistani Muslim woman, in opposition to the imperial western women, was not allowed to be apparent in public sphere. Her natural place for existence was defined as her home;²⁸ if there was need to cross her boundaries to enter in public

sphere of men, she was required to build walls of segregation around her through the practice of veil. Hence, veiled appearance became signifier of a pious women which created a binary in woman hood; between veiled woman who is religious, pious and guards her chastity and shame to maintain her honor, and an unveiled woman who is irreligious, Western, modern women who is locus of lust.²⁹

In conclusion, the binary resulted in objectified subject formation of Pakistani women, which could easily be controlled by the authority of men through patriarchal principles of culture and politicized Islam, to maintain the moral status of the nation. In essence, it becomes easy to police women in service of political ideology by regulating the appearance of their bodies in compliance to the circumscribed State parameters.³⁰ Hence, the body of Pakistani Muslim women are transformed as a terrain where nationalist distinctions are made visible³¹ and their veiled bodies acted as a signifier of purity, capable of revitalizing the Muslim community.³² The un-veiled body, hence, can be classified as a source of chaos and cause of disruption in society. Thus, women body turns into a tool of measuring purity³³ of the society, and women takes the role of maintainer of sexual order of Muslim community by promoting the virtues of obedience and modesty.³⁴ It is also observed, the defined roles of women by political Islamization connects rights of women with the political process of the country. This entails that with the change in political process the rights and roles of women will also be changed. This variation in performances of femininity in Pakistan has been observed with changing attributes on nationalism. The Zia's regime of political Islam encouraged women to be symbol of purity and religiously, and despised the unveiled secular feminists as hostile to Islamic ideology. Contrarily, the post 9/11 era demanded a type of nationalism which stimulated the secular feminists to raise their voice to build an image of religiously non-hostile Pakistani nation. This era also pronounced the efforts of female religious scholar who could interpret Islam with feminist undertones without following the traditional patriarchal religious authority. So that, Islam can be made acceptable by the upper middle class Pakistani women community as compared to the previous version of Islam which was accepted by the deprived social class and rejected by the upper-middle classes in the past.

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²¹ Ibid

²² Jamal, Amina. "Just between us: identity and representation among Muslim women." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2011): 202-212.

²³ Shaikh, Khanum. "Gender, Religious Agency, and the Subject of Al-Huda International." *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2011): 62-90. doi:10.2979/meridians.11.2.62.

²⁴ Former Army chief and Pakistan's 6th President, famous for reforming Law against women.

²⁵ Pal, Izzud-Din. "Women and Islam in Pakistan." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 449-64.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon argues this in his book the wretched of the earth.

²⁷ Pal, Izzud-Din. "Women and Islam in Pakistan." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 449-64.

²⁸ Ahmad, Irfan. "Cracks in the 'Mightiest Fortress': Jamaat-e-Islami's Changing Discourse on Women." *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2/3 (2008): 549-75.

²⁹ Silva, Neluka. "Shameless Women: Repression and Resistance in We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry." *Meridians* 3, no. 2 (2003): 28-51.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Haq, Farhat. "Militarism and Motherhood: The Women of the Lashkar-i-Tayyab in Pakistan." *Signs* 32, no. 4 (2007): 1023-046. doi:10.1086/512729.

³³ Ahmad, Irfan. "Cracks in the 'Mightiest Fortress': Jamaat-e-Islami's Changing Discourse on Women." *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2/3 (2008): 549-75.

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