



Exploring Female Sexuality in Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra*

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Received: 12th October 2022

Accepted: 10th November 2022

Published: 5th December 2022

ABSTRACT

The existentialist philosopher, Simone De Beauvoir, in her prominent book, *The Second Sex*, states that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (Beauvoir, 2011). This statement is built upon the idea that woman; or rather sexuality/gender performance is a social product resulting from society and physiological training. The term ‘woman’ is the aforementioned phrase alludes to the romanticized version of woman as perceived by the society. So, rather than being inherent, womanhood is something that a woman strives to achieve in order to become ideal. In the light of such statement, this paper aims to dismantle the notion that sexuality is a natural phenomenon by exploring Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra*, a novel set during the pre-partition period, and involving characters from aristocracy class, and also to represent how gender ideology prevalent in West affected the gender ideology in India.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Sexuality, Gender, History, Feminism, Elite Class

INTRODUCTION

It was often been perceived in the past that ‘sex’ (Beauvoir 2011) is a natural and instinctive which can never be altered or contested. However, the contemporary anthropologists, non-biological theorists, and feminist have established a shift in assigning different notions to the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. It is debated that the beliefs and components of gender and sexuality are not perpetual, but change from time, society and place. The gender ordering is a systematic pattern of conceptual and practical actions and behaviors carried out by people in a society to establish and recreate significant power relations between different genders. Patterns or standards of masculinity and femininity are generated and regenerated, and ties within them are structured/regulated through such gender ordering (Suleman et al., 2021; Suleman & Rahman, 2020). According to Judith Butler, the American philosopher and gender theorist, gender is a complete social construction, one that is not static,

because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis (Butler, 1990, p. 273).

Butler's gender theory incorporates the concept of performativity—the idea that gender is unavoidably 'performed' within prevailing heteroreality paradigms. Butler asserts that all classification of identities “are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.” (1990, p. 9) She further argues that: “the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (Butler, 1990, p. 6).

Moira Gatens contends that the bodies of different genders are assigned distinct societal values and meaning, which impacts their consciousness (1996). Likewise, Jonathon Ned Katz, an American historian of human sexuality, shows sexual identities are also socially constructed and vary by culture and time period. Cultural construction of sexuality consists of the opinion attitude towards sexuality differs due to the heterogeneity in values and practices among numerous cultures. The sexual identity of a person reverberates the culture, social structure and time period to which that person belongs. Sexuality is dynamic and assorted collection of identities and practices. According to Pat Caplan, “an experience becomes sexual by application of socially learned meanings” (1987, p.15). Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* dismantles and denaturalizes the notion of sexuality as naturally constructed outcome. He writes that “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which

power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to uncover” (Foucault, 1978, p.105). He observes and studies human sexuality as an historical concept which is socially constructed through various discourses within various contexts.

The late nineteenth century was an avant-garde that witnessed inevitable social and national awareness; it was a period of several social movements around the world (Minocha, 2022; Zahra, 2022). However, it was also a century of codes and regulations that had restricted women’s individuality and sexuality comparatively more than other period in the history. Though women were subordinated for being the lesser sex, and endured double standard of morality, a person’s forthrightness in exploring sexuality was tolerantly familiar until seventeenth century. As Foucault notes, by the time of Victorian period in England:

Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home...proper demeanour avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech. And sterile behaviour carried the taint of abnormality; if it insisted on making itself too visible; it would be designated accordingly and would have to pay the penalty (1978, p.03).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology that has been employed in order to analyse Futehally’s novel *Zohra* is qualitative. The study is carried within the framework of theories borrowed from gender studies and feminism.

GENDER IDEOLOGY

The gender ideology of the West also influenced the East in its grip. Eastern countries like India were comparatively sexually liberal until colonialism arrived to the colonies bringing ideologies and hegemonic discourses among other changes to the conquered lands. The colonizers glorified and implemented their superior beliefs, language and culture upon the conquered lands. The white man’s burden extended to save and educate the native women who were perceived as oppressed and ill-treated by their men and culture in the colonizer’s assessment. The Western gender ideologies became either an act of imitation, or threat among the colonised natives. The subservience of women and confinement of one gender’s sexuality more than the other gender lead to a division of two categories among the womenfolk, “the respectable Madonna and the rebarbative whore” (Jackson and Scott, 1996,p.03).

This binary construction of a gender opened the threshold to a more patriarchal society. Establishing control over the sexuality of women also limited women’s power and their

individuality. Some of the ways/forms through which power can be exercised are prohibition, censorship, and denial. The social construction of differences occurs within relations of power and privilege. Abby Ferber, a sociologist, contends that disparity and subjugation truly produce notions of crucial difference, hence that it is within the context of radicalized power dynamics that categories/classifications which are perceived to be innate or natural are produced.

APPLICATION

Zohra is one of the earliest Indian English novels written by the Muslim female writer, Zeenuth Futehally. The novel acts as a fiercely nostalgic historical and social commentary on an exceptional way of life which Futehally “felt on urgency to record, for owing to the passage of time it was fast disappearing” (Denby, 2004, p. 8). Being a historical novel, the book chronicles the life of a young Muslim girl, Zohra, from an opulent Hyderabadi Nawabi family, who has lived her life in seclusion until marriage and tries to navigate her life through family traditional values, and her new awakened sexuality. The novel reflects the rich cultural life and mannerism of Elite Muslim class in early twentieth century, Hyderabad, India. It was also a period of utter political chaos and social change that affected all social classes. The society in which Zohra grows up is revealed to be inflexible and gripped by strong social conventions. Muslim girls from high society were expected to obey the dictates of society and elders and live under domestic responsibilities. Throughout the novel Zohra plague herself between her suffocating desires, and the taboos that society has placed on her gender, she strives to subjugate her own needs in order to comply with requirements of her husband and family- sacrifices made. Changes in Zohra’s life against social and political background drives her in a world of absolute mayhem- her political awakening and emotional flowering leads to tragedy; “so inner and subterranean is the conflict of values that it weaves a delicate tapestry of sadness, not tragedy.” (Vasudev, 2005, p. 221) Woman and issues surrounding her had become a pivotal topic in the ongoing agitation of the Indian nationalists and reformers who sought to reclaim the glory of their past land and culture from the colonizers. Parallel to this, there also arose a communal streak among the natives. The Muslim reformers and leaders became sensible about the state of the Muslim women alongside their need to fight the imperialists. One of these subjects that created a friction among the Muslim reformers and leaders was the issue of Purdah. By the early twentieth century, the period in which Zohra is set in, Purdah wholly came to be associated with the Muslims only, and the leaders and reformers attempt to defend or condemn it. However, regardless of religion and caste, the

experience confronted by Indian women in the hands of imperialists and nationalists was universal. Native women from higher class society were subjected to more scrutiny; on them was placed the burden and responsibility to maintain the image of their community and society respectively. In the beginning of the novel, Zohra is seen being rebuked by her mother's old servant to behave how a woman of her class is expected to behave, just for playing in the garden of her home because the garden is an open space having no higher wall shield to guard her sight from intruders' eyes. The old maid scoffs at Zohra musingly about how girls in old times carried themselves, "those good old days...it is a classic that will never grow stale. For, ever since the fall of Baba Adam and Bibi Havva—with each successive generation, we have been descending lower and lower into a decline" (Futehally, 2004, p.02). Modesty was regarded as greatest virtue of a woman, this thought is also advocated by Muslim philosophers, reformers and leaders like Altaf Hussain Hali, Ashraf Ali Thanwi, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and others. The 'modernity' brought by the imperialists, encroached on the traditional values and customs of the Muslims, who were still seething from their fall of glory since 1857. The low walled garden is treated as threat to Zohra's modesty. Zohra is reminded of her appearance repeatedly, "Look how thin she has become! She is as slender as atwig. Girls at her age should be plumped and fresh" (Futehally, 2004, p.10). A girl from aristocratic family is supposed to be look plumped. Modesty is not only about appearance but also about decorum. A 'good' girl isn't supposed to take part or open her tongue on the topics related to her future. She is expected to follow and trust the elders, "for marriages and future, husbands were not subjects to be discussed between parents and daughters. Convention held such talks to be immodest" (Futehally, 2004, p.24). Zohra's 'suitability' is fathomed by how she obeys and not refuse the decisions made for her by her parents. The women of the aristocracy were also not supposed to follow professional careers. Zohra suppresses her aspirations and passions when her parents marry her off to a person who is years older than her. She could not refuse her parents because it would bring shame to their honor. Honor and Shame are two concepts that have governed the Indian mentality. Pitt-Rivers, a British social anthropologist, writes that, "Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society" (1965, p.21). All societies have sets of behavioural norms. Every society enforces its own set of laws, awarding all who follow and penalising individuals who do not. Honor and dishonor are products of society's social judgements; the greater homogeneous the judgment, the harsher the verdict. Honor and dishonor are two polarities of assessment; they represent the societal character reflected in social values (Peristiany, 1965, p. 09). However, there is a difference in how men and women behave to retain or maintain honour. A man's

act of honour is active one, whereas the woman's act of honour is passive. Women are expected to preserve their chastity, follow domestic and societal obligations without raising voice and so. Restricting women and dictating their sexuality by placing her inside four walls is one of the ways to overpower women. Women's honour is a component, a resource, which is controlled and manipulated by men (Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020). John Davis (1973) evaluates the presence women's honour across history as being somewhat less passive and derivative; a woman's reputation is determined not only by her chastity but also by her capacity to look after her husband and defend his interests.

The honour of a wife is dependent on her being alone, quiet, and secluded, but the husband must be engrossed in a net of economic worries and well-versed in other men's trade/professions. Men's obligations are proactive and materialistic, whereas female roles are more defensive than passive (Shepard 2000). "The society in which Zohra was growing up in Hyderabad knew no flexibility. A girl of her background was expected to comply unreservedly with the wishes of her parents at the expense of her own dreams and desires." (Denby, 2004, p. 7). Zohra's helplessness to go against her parents' wishes to marry in fear of dishonouring them and angering God shows how far society has incorporated the trope of 'good vs bad' woman in the mind of public. The age factor fails to bridge the emotional gap between Zohra and her husband, Bashir. Futehally thoughtfully details the conflicts a young woman heart who has recently come out of Purdah (home seclusion, not attire) post-marriage. During her honeymoon, the couple meet Bashir's old friend and his family. Zohra undergoes an emotional upheaval after meeting Siraj (Bashir's friend's brother-in-law) who is of her age. Siraj shares her emotional and romantic nature, unlike Bashir's practicality. Bashir recognizes that the secluded life of Zohra prior their marriage made her vulnerable to other men,

He knew she had a secluded life and had little insight into men's natures; she was naïve, and Siraj was the kind of person who could go all out to entice girls. He wondered if he should warn her... She looked cheerful enough with him, but he (Bashir) could not help noticing that she was much livelier in Siraj's company (Futehally, 2004, p.83).

Before her marriage, Zohra had never seen herself through the eyes of a male stranger, and when she does see herself from Siraj's eyes, she falls in confused rapture affirming herself of her sexual appeal on other gender, "though she did not regret it, she knew she would have to be more careful in her behaviour with them (men)" (Futehally, 2004, p.96). The realisation of

her allure in men's eyes subside her inferior complexity that she had while growing up in a purdah system family.

Eventually, Zohra's romantic at heart falls in love her brother-in-law, Hamid, with whom she shares intense emotional and intellectual compatibility, resulting in her tragic death. Discouraged by the fear of societal taunts, taboos, and social obligations, Zohra is unable to fulfil her sexual awakening or follow her passion. Her decision to take respite in her children and serve education to poor children is a way to hide away from her burning desires for Hamid. On other hand, we have Safia, Zohra's only sister-in-law, who has been married to Yusuf for a long time but is infertile. She lacks Zohra's wisdom, beauty and aesthetic sense. Conscious of her inability to become a mother and society's rising silent disapproval, she takes resort in extravagance, something that is frowned upon by her mother who regards such actions an unlady-like. Safia's identity is now associated by her incapability to become a mother. The character Jehan Ara, Siraj's sister, serves as a foil to Zohra. The binary of how a woman should behave and how not is brought to front through them. While Zohra is silent and simple, always nurturing an idea of love and romance inside of her, Jehan Ara is loud and flirtatious which is grimaced by many respectable families in context to how a woman should present herself to others. An open exhibition of sexual affection between husband and wife, however mild in degree, is also criticized. When Bashir visits Zohra at her parents' home, "there had to be restrictions placed on their conduct, as any display of affection in the presence of others was considered vulgar and immodest. Besides, it was against his own temperament" (Futehally, 2004, p.99).

Bashir's struggle to hide his anxiety for staying away from Zohra for so long cements the point that affection and love between man and woman in public was not tolerated favourably. An unabashed attitude on woman's part that threatens society's conventions and compromise gender modesty is highlighted in this episode. Zohra would never encourage Bashir, nor she would take him to her room, sometimes the other manoeuvred to leave them alone in the courtyard but there was no real privacy. Sexuality was heavily protected so it would not bring shame to these elite class families' honour. The novel also brings stark contrast between men and women's sexuality. The men are given undue sexual advantage to indulge unlike women who are severely dissuaded from displaying any kind of sexual desire or longings even for their husband. Zohra's father, Nawab Sahab's sexual consumption with the dancing girls, Yusuf's attempt to cross the familial boundary and reach Zohra in temptation, and Hamid

one-night stands in order to forget Zohra, all of these represents how men exercise power, and manipulate society in receiving less judgement.

CONCLUSION

Zeenuth Futehally's novel *Zohra* is a testimony that the women from elite class during early twentieth century lived under constant scrutiny of the society. As ironic it may sound, women belonging to a higher class had their sexuality and individuality more curbed as the women of other classes. *Zohra* combines the private and public life; it condemns the purdah system that partially leaves a girl, grown up in secluded family, inexperienced and unprepared for the reality of the world. Sexuality throughout novel has been represented as socially and culturally component. Society conventions and dictates govern the conducts of all the female characters. As Foucault says, "sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to uncover.(Foucault, 1978, p.105) Sexual practices, their meaning, their relationship to identity, and even what behaviours are labelled sexual are all unnaturally produced. Hence, treatment of sexuality in *Zohra* asserts the fact that sexuality is socially constructed and culturally operated.

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