

Rediscovering the Discourse on Women's Freedom: A Feminist Exploration of Bano Qudsia's Fiction

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Abstract

Bano Qudsia is an influential and one among the most celebrated Pakistani fiction writers. She has a special significance in normalizing the established regimes of gender in the Pakistani society. She presents, in her writings, the conditions and states of women that belong to certain classes in the modern world, especially modern Pakistani society. It will be a safe assumption to consider that she along with giving a discourse in her fiction has also lived in accordance with her ideals. There has been an extensive research on Qudsia, but she has never been looked into with the perspective of gender specifically. This paper intends to highlight the perspective of Bano Qudsia on freedom of women, as described in her novel *Raja Gidh*. Textual analysis technique of the qualitative methodology is being used for interpretation and description of the content of the novel. Under the textual analysis, 'Close Reading' and 'Narrative Analysis' has been done. Life spans of three characters of the novel are thoroughly examined from a gender perspective. The writer's endorsement of the traditional patriarchal view of the society and an attempt of its universalization by incorporating the theme of biological essentialism side by side in her novel, have been analyzed in this research paper. The impact of her novel in our society, especially against the budding feminist movement has been one of the detrimental contributing factors, leaving our women bereft and at the mercy of a traditional and heartless patriarchal society.

Keywords: Bano Qudsia, *Raja Gidh*, Urdu Fiction, Feminism, Patriarchy

Introduction

Bano Qudsia is unique in the fact that she has normalized, after establishing, the traditional gender regimes which are given actual strength by her practice of the same ideals in her real life. Being a land of culture, Pakistan has a fair number of people who are connect with the normative traditional discourse. When it comes to developing a social perspective in the general public, the most exact force is culture. It is also the major force in creating the belief system and mindset of the masses (Qadeer, 2006). To infer that the Pakistani society is basically a traditional society and this traditional narrative receives almost no opposition; is nearest to reason. This narrative or mindset receives no opposition be it ideological or practical from any influential stakeholder (Jillani, 2008). Literature being the purest and most refined source of the traditional narrative has several other sources (Juriette, 2008). Fiction is among the most influential and a deep-rooted literary category for it acts out the past and establishes the future of any society in the present context and has an influence on

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the patterns of thinking in the individuals of that society, subtly and effortlessly. Pakistan's fiction and its tradition have remained, to a great degree, engaged with gender issues; even after the existence of this abundance of gendered fiction, it has not been fully capable of raising a debate on these issues. Fiction plays an important role in portraying gender, and if we do not critically present those realities, we will continue to depict an incomplete view of the gender in our society.

Qudsia, being probably the sole Urdu fiction author, who has addressed gender issues has remained steadfast in her beliefs throughout her life, even remaining strong in upheavals, by believing on "Personal is Political" (Heberle, 2016). Qudsia's autobiography by the name, *Rah-e-Rawan* (Qudsia, 2011), evidently tells us the same which is also supplemented amply through the media interviews she has given. Qudsia, being a house wife, as is the norm of traditional Pakistani women was submissive to her husband and lived a positively other-directed life. She would walk one step behind her husband, is a good wife to him by obeying him until his death and would ask him before even publishing her work. She was of the old perspective that a woman's man is a demigod for her, and she must obey him in that respect. Her first public appearance without her husband was only after her husband's death in 2004. She was of the view that a woman must obey his man in all the injunctions of life. Not only that, she believed that a woman's duty does not end in obeying her husband, but she is the sole mentor to her children. Qudsia's friend circle was limited to the friends of her husband; scarcely she had any personal friends, strictly speaking. Her thesis was very clear, about which she was confidently outspoken, that a woman has responsibility towards her man but her views on reciprocity, the man's duty towards his woman, were not known. Therefore, she has received criticism from a notable class of people (namely progressives', young generation with a belief in gender equality, women's rights activists, academic groups, progressive writers etc.) on all fronts owing to her ideas concerning the roles and duties specific to a gender, either in her person or in her practical capacity (Qudsia, 2011).

Qudsia has been writing for a long time, indulging in non-fictional and fictional pieces of writing, in which she addresses woman as a complete human being having a rational, moral, emotional, and a spiritual being/self and has not reduced it to merely a biological being. Defining woman as a biological and a merely physical being, according to her, is a minimalistic perspective; to accept woman being a biological subject is an attempt, in her perspective, that reduces her whole existence and essence to her bodily self (Qudsia, 2011). Her discourses address the contextual and contemporary conditions in a society that is concerned with the historical background of their local woman. Qudsia has written extensively, she has authored seven novels, two biographies, ten short stories, twelve dramas. Extensive academic research work has been done on her writings by positioning her as a dramatist, autobiography writer, short story writer, and a spiritual writer (Bano, 2008; Naz, 2015; Shami, 2006; Zia,

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2012). A number of articles have been written on Qudsia that have appeared on print media ("Bano Qudsia & Writers (1970s)," 2017; Mushtaq, 2010; Raja, 2007). But neither has analyzed Qudsia's writings on gender perspective with a feminist lens; nor have academics and researchers challenged and questioned her role in literature on presenting and endorsing traditional gender roles, particularly in her most famous Urdu novel *Raja Gidh*.

Qudsia's first full-length novel is *Raja Gidh* which published in 1981 and considered as most widely read Urdu novels since its publications. Although Qudsia fictional work is expanded on ten (10) short story books, about twelve (12) dramas, seven (07) novels, and two (02) biographies. Among all of these pieces of literature *Raja Gidh* has gained the greatest fame. Its literal meaning is "The Vulture King". The novel's title has been interpreted as "King Buzzard" (Raja, 2007). *Raja Gidh* is among the major novels of female fiction produced in Pakistan and is an acclaimed masterpiece regarded with many levels of appreciation. It is a huge importance in the plethora of writings from Pakistan in female fiction. The rest of her fictional writings are also on social themes and issues but have not been able to gain such attention of the reader as much as has been given to *Raja Gidh*. Taking the immense popularity of this novel into consideration, it has been publishing ever since its first appearance and has now become a part of Pakistan's Central Superior Service (CSS) (Raja, 2007).

'*Raja Gidh*', a novel whose plot revolves about and around a love triangle. This triangle is owed to Seemi Shah's (a girl who is from an upper-middle-class family) love for the two of her classmates, namely Qayyum (the narrator) and Aftab (the second protagonist, or rather the antagonist). Some of the notable characters from the novel are: Sohail (a liberal professor who is young), Amtul (a turned prostitute who was once a radio artist), Maasi Ulfat (a lower-class woman), Abida (a married middle-class woman who is desperate to become a mother) and Roshan (a middle-class girl from a conservative family who is oppressed). The novel orbits around the unrequited love of the two characters namely, Seemi Shah (the protagonist) and Qayyum (the narrator). Both of them face depression owing to the unfulfilled desires of loving and failures in finding true love. In a fairly deeper study, one understands that the novel comes in touch with the Muslim creed of '*Halaal*' (the permissible) and '*Haraam*' (the forbidden). In this novel, *vulture*: a bird famous for scavenging is a metaphor for the rebellion against the ethical impostions of religion and society. The analogy of birds congregating to discuss the issue of making the vulture an outcast for he is used to symbolize '*Haraam*' – frequently appears in the novel (Qudsia, 1981).

The novel, apart from being a romantic tale in its appearance, raises certain questions on the objectiveness of morals. It narrates the effects of relationships and gender responsibilities in the Pakistani society, on the social multiplicity, especially keeping

in mind the context of the writer, and suggests some answers to the raised questions. It can be said that this is the first work of Urdu fiction that tries to complement and amalgamate modern scientific concepts with religion and tradition and affirms the existing gender roles in our society. The basic thematic substance of the novel come from the binary opposites of '*Halaal*'(legal) and '*Haraam*'(illegal), and the consequential spiritual deterioration caused by '*Haraam*' practices and the descent into insanity. Simultaneously, there is an underlying attempt at every form of feminist ideas or its manifestations (Qudsia, 1981).

To briefly describe it, Qudsia, in *Raja Gidh*, depicts the life span of her characters and elaborately explains the importance of religion, culture and other societal institutions in drawing the future and lifestyle of a woman. This paper tries to explore gender narrative in the context of the impact of freedom of women described in *Raja Gidh*. It explores the important aspects of Qudsia's works which have remained disregarded until now. There exists a need for feminist literary critical gender analysis.

Methodology

This research work entails analysis of *Raja Gidh* and explores the feminine themes in the text. This work aims at finding out the gender narrative in the context of freedom of women of the leading and most-published female writer of Pakistan since Indo-Pak separation in 1947. The research method that is being employed is qualitative. The data has been analyzed by an interpretative approach which allows the researcher to extract meaning and interpret the text (Mason, 2002). Views can differ in terms of description and interpretation in any qualitative research as in the methodological approach; for the design of the research, a textual analysis is being preferred. The textual analysis aims to create and understand a dialogue between the reader and the text and is not restricted to the author's perspective (Bauer, Biquelet, & Suerdem, 2014). This article only aims to analyze the part related to women and this technique analysis of a text is best fitted as it is focused on selecting a specific question of any social structure rather than inquiring it holistically. This analysis of the text creates a relation between the textual and the contextual meaning of the text (Lockyer, 2008).

Two techniques have been incorporated for the data analysis, in the category of textual analysis: 'Closed Reading' and 'Narrative Analysis'. Closed reading is defined as a careful, organized and attentive exploration of a text and an observant attempt towards the comprehension of the deeper meanings (Brummett, 2010), whereas, the Narrative Analysis consists of an analysis of a given narration of the novel, its elements in the plot, its character analysis, and the connections between them for a more nuanced reading of these relationships. Analysis of the narrative is where the researcher has, after identifying, focused on the plot of the novel, which has a direct relation with the status of women; as Hennink et al. (2011) has expounded, that the Narrative approach "identifies" the core 'story' of your text and describes the issues

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that have particular influence on the story, there may be a number of sub plots in the text, or parallel scenarios of various kinds of participants that can be spun into the fabric of the narrative" (p. 279).

However, the validity of textual analysis is a major criticism on the method as it might be assumed that the text solely expresses the researcher's perspective. To resolve this issue, the researchers should engage themselves critically in the process of self-reflection (Locker, 2008). The solution to this problem is that the researcher adopts a different textual analysis while affirming his own positionality (Lockyer, 2008). In research, positionality means the perspective of the researcher concerning the world and the position adopted for the particular research (Foote & Bartell, 2011). Reflexivity helps clarify the researcher's position which supports the researcher and the readers (Smith, 1999).

In this research, the researcher's positionality of a feminist writer with the theoretical ideology of geocentricism (Golban & Ciobanu, 2008) helped her to be self-reflective. The emic description is a cultural relativist perspective and emic perspective is a culturally neutral realist perspective (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). In this specific study, the investigator's ontological position will be that of an insider where the investigator has used the emic perspective urged by her life experiences and cultural context. To cut it short, the researcher has followed the qualitative methodology under the interpretative domain in the qualitative research, by combining and mixing certain reading strategies, which have been extracted from literary study. Data analysis is taken from social sciences. The original text has been perused and observed closely, so that the understanding of how the relation between the parts of the text establishes and how meaning is constructed regarding societal realities.

Findings

The Stance of Qudsia on the Life-Span of a Free Woman

Raja Gidh takes, for the specimen; the lives of a multiplicity of free women have a multiplicity of different background, social contexts and age groups. The paper analyzes the common underlying themes, the differences, the reasons for these differences, and finally the impact of freedom they had. To this note, the three main female characters i.e., Semi Shah, Masi Ulfat and Amtul have been thoroughly examined. The novel narrates the lifespan of these characters instead of critically analyzing them in a fixed time frame. The overall life history makes the reader more adamant about the result anyone can have who would enjoy that level of freedom.

Seemi Shah – A Free Woman, an Easy Prey for the Vultures

The character of Seemi Shah engages the novel to the utmost for she is the most important character. Being the only daughter of a bureaucrat of a very high rank she is confident and outspoken young girl, who has good looks and who lives in one of the most expensive areas of her locality. She has become a good prey for the men in her surrounding, notably her professor (Sohail). Her parents have made sure that her upbringing is from the finest institutes of the city. Although her parents have done a lot to give her luxuries and tutoring, they have been unsuccessful in one thing and that is to provide her with an environment of warmth and love at their home. She has mostly lived with her nanny who has been her sole connection with love and insatiate, she looks for true love, inevitably. She has been raised as an open and free individual where her interaction with the boys is with utmost confidence, but this also entered a sense of ego due to which she is unable to bear defeat. This is why the rejection of Aftab's mother does act positively in her and she ends up feeling dejected and rejected for that is a defeat. At this point, Qayyum (the vulture) gets the best of her for she has taken her defeat so seriously that she cannot face herself and let's go of herself, becoming pray the vulture. Here the author shows how the elite class is miserably defeated of its own ideals and discourses of life. A free woman becomes an easy prey for the men of her society for the ideals that free people live by make them sellable items. This is because those ideals are indecently selfish and self-absorbed. They fall prey to those who are nothing but the gluttonous.

Masi Ulfat – The Free Woman, a Tragic End

The author has then taken another specimen, this time from the lower class. Masi Ulfat has lost her husband a long time ago. She bears a son from her late spouse. Ulfat, after being widowed, is portrayed by Qudsia as a 'free woman'. Qudsia shows that Ulfat is very fond of her freedom, unaware of its consequences. The result of her ideal of freedom is a directionless life, morally. Earning a livelihood of managing a clay oven (tandoor) in her village, she is indulged in prostitution in order to gather some extra money, a saving to provide her son a better future. As a result, she ends up defaming herself in the whole of the village. She becomes an embarrassment for her son, ironically, for whose future she had indulged in such acts. Her son, emotionally and psychologically tormented by her mother becoming the talk of the town, leaves the village. Ulfat is devastated by this. She becomes frenzied and throws away all the cash she has saved for her son's future. She also leaves the village, apparently in sheer insanity. This concludes the tragic end another of Qudsia's 'free woman'.

Amtul – The Essentiality of a Male Guardianship

Here there is another character, Amtul, who, when she was quite young, was a worker at a radio station and had a good reputation among the producers (male). However, as

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she ages she loses the attention of the producers and ultimately loses her job. Amtul, who is a divorced woman with a spoiled son, indulges in immoral activities and became a prostitute to earn a living. This tragic story ends in an even greater tragedy where she gets murdered in her middle age. This honor killing of her by her own son, whose sustenance was her main concern in indulging in that preposterous activity shows how Qudsia's character lack safety without a male guardian.

Discussion

Qudsia identifies with all the women in her novel and does not portray them as evil, but the structure of her novel's plot ultimately hints at the deduction that in a patriarchal society, like the Pakistani society, liberation of women will do more damage than repair. Women's free choice won't make their life any better. Rather, it would worsen. Hence, she concludes that the conventional gender roles have a very actual and pragmatic role in the society (Lindsey, 2015). She tries to defend the holiness of these conventional gender characteristics and dominations through her characters tragic ends. She emphasizes on the equilibrium in the society and if it is disturbed, by proposing liberty for women, it will only result in more problems.

Moreover, Qudsia has gone to such extent where she considers this attempt at liberation of women such a toxic attitude that it could end in the punishment of the whole of humanity by them being extinct. She insists that for men, it is a kind of a biological determinism that they act sexually in a very aggressive manner, like vultures are which shifts the blame from them and takes to the women who must guard themselves enough to keep the social fabric intact and chaste. This patriarchal notion of putting all responsibility on women is defined as "Power of Sex" in the "Male-Supremacist Ideology" presented by an American radical feminist Andrea Dworkin (Dworkin, 1981). According to her, male-Supremacist society asserts that women are responsible for male sexual arisen "*whatever he (the man species) does, he does because of a provocation that inherits in the female*" (Dworkin, 1981, p.22). Qudsia supports this patriarchal narrative in her work by putting all sexual responsibility on women. Qudsia, on the contrary, has neglected the harassment faced by women and young girls. This harassment is not only in their families but also in the society. The psychological traumas with which these women have to cope for the entirety of their lives in the patriarchal settings are owed to these harassments. She somehow avoids the objective reality by ignoring the fact that a lot of incidents involving sexual assaults go unreported in our society because such is the way of this society that the publicization of these incidents will give the girl and her family a bad name for the rest of their lives, even if she is victimized rather than being an active partner in the aforementioned crime. Dworkin defines it as "Power of Naming" which

male supremacist society uses to make women silent over violence by attaching shaming to the victim (Brecher, 2015; Dworkin, 1981, p.17).

Qudsia has influenced, through her powerful pen, the infant of women rights in Pakistan by giving it the environment and circumstances that were need for its growth. She must have been doing it to liberate women of the discourse and suppression enforced by the society but incidentally, she was doing it on the stake of women empowerment itself. She did not contextualize her attempts in the global scenario where western woman has surpassed all the issues to which she was merely pointing. Her lack of acknowledgment of the fact that the western woman's liberation has made her a more active participant in the growth of the world making her contributes to it (Synder, 2008).

The writer's indifference towards the modern feminist ideas shows that she was unable to find such shortcomings in their society, which she foresaw in our culture. Had she understood the modern western woman, she must have used her understanding to fortify her perspective. Therefore, it can be safely said that even though she has tried to make her rationale seem universal, by integrating biological essentialism (Warin & Hammarstrom, 2018; Witt, 2011) in the thematic substance of this novel, her canvas still remains pretty narrow after all, for the western femininity has been kept out of it, which could have been the most relevant issue that could provide her with a backdrop for her theme. Secondly, the writer portrays the contradictory gender, i.e., women deeply entrenched in their conventional and spiritual ideals and also, living with a man with the duties of a guardian, even if they are inactive ones. She intentionally portrays women who have an inactive male guardian. The writer wishes to prove that even in a male dominating society, living under the shadow of a guardian i.e. a male is better than relying on one's own self (Kringelbach, 2016; Pateman, 1988).

The writer is in a general disapproval of love affairs, specifically if women are engaged in such affairs. The woman who contravene from societal cultural and moral restrictions are to pass through despondent mental situations and end up becoming a disappointment, emphasizes Qudsia (Wilson, Mikahere-Hall, Jackson, Cootes, & Sherwood, 2019; Turner, 2004). For example, Amtul and Seemi Shah are two perfect models from the lower and upper classes respectively. Even though Roshan goes against the religious, and the societal restrictions by indulging in extra marital sexual affairs with Iftikhar and is impregnated by his child as a result; but, she reunites with him with the help of Qayyum for she remains loyal to him.

Conclusion

Our society is rigid and traditional in the manner that it does not support any open and frank interaction between males and females. This study of *Raja Gidh* demonstrates

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that this novel presents considerable shades women characters that with endorse this fact and gives a bad ending to those characters that have tried and stood against the norms of the society. Thus, we see, that the patriarchal society considers itself pardoned of the fact that it has been unfair to women by justifying itself through finding the fault in the women itself. Naturally, women who have been living in such kind of societal circumstances cannot escape from suffering psychological traumas. The writer endorses the traditional concept that a male guardian is essential even if he is not playing a positive and encouraging role in a woman's life. According to the writer, freedom of women creates more harm than good for women themselves. She strongly endorses the traditional gender roles through various characters to whom we can easily relate and can find in our society. Thus, Bano Qudsia did not correctly portray the concept of women freedom through the female characters, their circumstances and wrong choices, as part of the novel's plot, mislead the reader that freedom of women is inherently a bad thing, against the natural order and always ends up tragically

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