

Repression a Myth: An Enquiry into the Muslim Woman's World and her Sexuality

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Abstract

This paper tries to understand and define a woman and explore her sexuality. It also tries to explore a Muslim women's world through secondary sources and films. Women, and especially Muslim women in India, are believed to be repressed in every term. The author believes otherwise. This paper tries to answer questions like how are women different from men, why is a woman's sexuality feared, why is she controlled, and why is Muslim women being perceived as a repressed lot when there are ample sources and experiences which suggest otherwise.

Keywords: Female Sexuality, Women, Muslim women, Cultural construction, Homosexuality, Repression, Gender equality, Good girl-bad guy love.

Introduction:

Feminist, homely, empowered, active, passive, submissive, civilized, house-wife, whore, prostitute, goddess, witch, Hindu, Muslim, Indian, western, homosexual, bitch, Eve, Hawwa, Sita, Savitri, Kali, Surpankha, Hind, whatever you call her, she is just and above all a woman first. Later come the adjectives and nouns-common or proper. But what a woman is? Why is she feared? Why is she controlled-by men and women equally?

No one is going to buy the idea if I write that a woman is just a woman like a man is just a man. I need to write something sensational which I won't be writing. My intension here is to read a woman as it is, I mean in her raw form. This will not be an objective study as it cannot be objective. The subjective biases are sure to pop up. A woman can be studied in relation to the time and space she is in.

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Now the problem is how to study a woman? By the nature of her desires, by the biological and/or emotional function of her vagina, by her everyday routine, by the rituals she performs, by the outdoor work or profession she is in, by the names society (especially male society) has given her, by the male gaze, by the relationships she is into, or in socio-political, cultural and religious context. Why at all there is a need to study 'women'? The basic difference of a woman from a man is the possession of a vagina and her ability to reproduce. She reproduces with the help (of sperm from) of man. Neither of them is able completely without the other. Feminists suggest going on a no-sex strike and things like this so that man submits to her. Did the so-called feminists think as to what the woman wants? Woman can be penis-lover and penis-fearer. We hear of women falling for 'bad guys' time and again, breaking the hearts of the much 'nice guys'. My understanding allows me to draw the conclusion that these 'nice guys' are not so nice on the 'other' front. They might be loving and caring. But, is that all what a woman wants? On the other hand, 'bad guys' provide them the satisfaction in bed. We can say that there are certain penises which women like in comparison to several others. This loving of certain kind of penis makes her to admit the so-called supremacy of men. By 'loving of penis', I mean not just the organ or flesh called 'penis' but the action-violent and wild, involved in it. The idea of 'untamable' is powerful too. When a woman knows that a man is not that easily tamed, she tries harder to gain his attention, and the attention once gained, it is her duty not to 'tame' him fully. If he is tamed fully, he might come parallel to the 'nice guy' which she rejects. She submits to him voluntarily, to keep his raw masculine qualities intact. Same is the case with men. They can very well cope with an androgynous woman. If two people are in love or married or are in a live-in relationship, they accommodate. The idea of cultural conditioning, upbringing in a certain environment, educational background may arise in initial years, however, in most cases, people co-operate and accommodate. Going against the convention is another thrilling exercise. Parents generally tend to find 'nice guys' for their girls-to-be-married. Some of these 'nice guys' turn out to be 'bad guys' too. I am not referring to domestic violence sort of

thing here. That is another field which I am not going to discuss here as it would take another research to deal with that topic. What I am referring here is plain sexual desire.

Things, I believe, do not work on two planes- 1) when there is role-conflict and role-strain and 2) when two bodies do not respond to each other at the same or nearly same rate. The vagina and the penis should get together well.

There are a number of movies, which deal with the theme of girl falling in love for a 'bad guy' and find ways to 'get' him even after repeated heartbreaks by him, like Fight Club (1999); Crazy, Stupid, Love (2011); I hate Love Storys (2010), A Walk to Remember (2002); Here on Earth (2000); Hero (1983); Highway (2014); John Tucker Must Die (2006); Ladies Vs Rickey Behl (2011); Blue Crush (2002); Ishq Vishq (2003); Bachna Aye Haseeno (2008); Cocktail (2012); Mere Yaar ki Shadi Hai (2002); She is All That (1999); 9 ½ Weeks (1986); Grease (1978); Tres Metros sobre el cielo (2010); Fear (1996); Ravan (2010); Ankur (1974); Kya Kehna (2000); Deewar (1975); Krishna (1996); Jeet (1996) and all those 1970s and 1990s Bollywood movies which carry an image of anti-hero (the likes of Amitabh Bachchan, Akshay Kumar, Sunny Deol, and Suniel Shetty), where the anti-heroes are the protagonists, the actual heroes of the films for whom the heroine falls. The anti-hero might have taken birth in the 1970s Hindustani films, but trend shows that the actual topic of 'bad-guy loving rejecting the nice-guys' reached its heights after the 2000. The Hindu myth of Krishna in India might have an influence over the Hindustani films. Krishna seems to be a favourite, irrespective of any religions. The cinematic representation of 'bad guy' seems to be a transformation of the Krishna myth. Krishna as a myth has transformed gradually and Radha was supposedly much later addition. References to Radha are available in the Sanskrit texts from the eighth century onwards (Singer 1966). Krishna is an anti-hero with black colour as against the heightened supremacy of white colour, he is a butter-thief, he had many wives, he was in an extra-marital incestuous relationship with Radha, he would sprinkle colours on the gopis and take away their clothes which were kept on the riverside, while they were bathing, and he was beaten by bamboo sticks by gopis and Radha even if females were passionate

about him. Krishna is popularly regarded as the God of love. Krishna would tease Radha by touching her breasts and colour them and in turn Radha would rebuke him but temporarily and would show more active sexuality by turning more aggressive and passionate. The festival of Holi, which arrives in spring season, carries with it *kama*, the desire of love or love-making, had a phenomenal importance in Krishna's life (Anderson 1996:136).

Good guy or bad guy, it is the woman who chooses the worth. Same is the case with men. It is the men who choose the woman's worth. There is a saying that goes like this: "A good wife is one, who takes care of her husband as a mother, makes love to him like a whore, and loves him like her baby." The above saying could have also been applied in case of a woman, in a way that "a good husband is one who takes care of his wife like a father, makes love to her like a gigolo, and loves her like his baby." But, such saying is non-existent in our society and to my knowledge, in any society for that matter, because of the patriarchal structure of the society that exists today. Men and women are not that different as cultural conditioning would have us believe.

The cultural construction of vagina:

This idea came to my mind when I asked two male friends of mine as to where they see the 'woman' in the movie, *Gangs of Wasseypur*. Their prompt reply came, "When Nasir (played by Piyush Mishra who is a man other than Naghma's husband) came to Naghma Khatoon (Richa Chaddha) and she was about to untie her petticoat." Why is it that they see her 'sexual form' or 'sexual need' as the only 'womanly character'? What about the times when she single-handedly brings up the children when her husband went for a second wife and spending much of his time and money on her. Why could they not see that she beats up one of her children when he was lured by a rival man to his father and said that he is bringing a bad name to his father? Why could they not see that she let her husband touch her even after coming from the second wife, however, on one condition that he bathes himself before coming to her bed? Is it not womanly? The answer would be easier if one reverses the situation and rethink whether a man could have done such things and behaved in a similar

manner as Naghma did. The answer is an outright ‘No’. And if at all there are a few, a very few men who would have done the same as Naghma Khatoon did, in that case, I must say exception proves the validity of law. However, the so-called ‘Third wave’ feminism would argue otherwise and would reject altogether the idea that a woman shares a common gender identity or something that is womanly and such set of experiences. On the other hand, Charlotte Bunch (1996) argues that the fundamental basis of feminism is the body of the woman and the violence committed against it. (Bunch, Charlotte. 1995. “Transforming Human Rights from a Feminist Perspective.” In *Women’s Rights/Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Julie Peters, and Andrea Wolper, 11 – 17. London: Routledge.)

The whole idea of vagina and the stress over it, the stress over the ‘dangerous’ nature of vagina seems to come from certain myths like that of the myth of Pandora. Pandora’s Box is taken as a symbol for vagina. Also the forbidden fruit that was eaten by Adam and Eve, it is believed, was either apple or a wheat grain. Be it apple or a grain, both have resemblances with the structure of vagina.

Feminine sexuality has always been a favorite topic more than that of masculine sexuality for writers and scholars alike or for that matter a layman. Naomi Wolf writes:

The common misreading of the vagina as “mere flesh” is a major reason for this discomfort. Female sexual pleasure, rightly understood, is not just about sexuality, or just about pleasure. It serves, also, as a medium of female self-knowledge and hopefulness; female creativity and courage; female focus and initiative; female bliss and transcendence; and as medium of a sensibility that feels very much like freedom. To understand the vagina properly is to realize that it is not only coextensive with the female brain, but is also, essentially, part of the female soul.

Vagina has been given so much importance in Arab cultures, not in a positive sense but as a threat to masculine power. It is regarded solely for the pleasures of men. In Egypt,

the clitoris is amputated, be it in rural or urban area, be it an educated or an uneducated family. In Sudan, it is crueler. The clitoris along with two major outer lips (labia majora) and the two minor inner lips (labia minora) are cut off. The outer opening of the vagina is the only left portion but it is made sure that some narrowing of the vagina is carried out with a few extra stitches (Saadawi 1980:9).

Such operations are done in order to keep the girl's virginity intact and that her stitches can be opened on marriage so that the male organ of the bridegroom can be introduced. The feminist scholar, Saadawi herself went through this kind of torture of circumcision when she was barely six despite her both parents being educated (ibid: 7-8.) The reason behind female circumcision is believed to be minimization of sexual desire. Female children as soon as they reach puberty, in India are taught to safeguard their 'hymen'. But we must not forget that even male children go through the process of circumcision. They may site different reasons for it, but one outcome is the sexual pleasure for women. Also they are advised to opt for celibacy until they get married. Masturbation even is seen as a sin. In such cases, as Saadawi writes:

They are also victims of a society that segregates the sexes, and that considers sex a sin and a shame which can only be practiced within the framework of an official marriage contract. Apart from this permitted avenue for sexual relations, society forbids adolescents and young men to practice sex in any form, other than that of nocturnal emissions... Young men therefore have no alternative but to wait until they have accumulated sufficient money in their pockets to permit them to marry according to Allah's directives and those of the Prophet (ibid:13).

I do not challenge the atrocities against a large number of women across the globe, for reasons attached to the vagina. However, in the above point, I would say that while circumcision among females is part of Arab cultures, circumcision among Muslim males, whichever culture they belong, is a must and is prescribed. Thankfully, in India, to the best of my knowledge, female circumcision is not reported. This again brings us to the idea in the

beginning of the paper that a woman is just a woman like the man is just a man, none is superior to the other, neither in theory nor in practice, I mean if we closely observe the practices. We tend to be a society suffering from 'inferiority complex'. We build theories of submission and tend to submit to these theories in the form of practices and then make a hullabaloo over it. Do not we see women battered by their husbands driving away people and asking them not to interfere in their personal matters and do not we hear things like "He is my husband and let him beat me or kill me, who are you to interfere?". Is it a statement made by some 'helpless' woman? I believe not. There are examples where women fed up of domestic violence or doubting an affair kill their husbands. There are examples of men killing their wives too over the same issues. So, where are the women powerless? In each case and each circumstance, she knows what to do and how things can be tackled. Only her ways are different from a man. Are not the men biologically different from her? If they are two different creatures of human race, can't they think differently, is not there a male approach and a female approach, is there not a male gaze and a female gaze and do not girls these days divorce men who have erectile dysfunction, or small penises or things related to sexual dissatisfaction like men does in similar cases related to women?

Marriage versus feminism:

It is always said that women are forced to choose between marriage and career. However, on the other hand, we see staunch or radical feminists like Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Naomi Wolf, Vina Mazumdar, Lotika Sarkar, getting married. Most of these might be failed marriages, but the very idea of 'getting married' at all is interesting and questioning in these cases. Who would 'force' them to marry? Going by the western definition of 'feminism', from this trend, it seems that either you remain a feminist or you get married. Both marriage and western feminism does not go hand in hand. Islam however regards 'marriage' as half the duty fulfilled towards the religion. It sees sex between husband and wife as a form of worship. Al Ghazzali writes:

Since Allah has revealed his secret to us, and has instructed us clearly what to do, refraining from marriage is like refusing to plough the earth, and wasting the seed. It means leaving the useful tools which Allah has created for us idle, and is a crime against the self-evident reasons and obvious aims of the phenomenon of creation, aims written on the sexual organs in Divine handwriting (Saadawi 1980:137).

Feminism is understood as a complex set of political ideologies used by the women's movement to advance the cause of women's equality and to end the sexist theory and practice of social oppression. In Laura Brunell's view, Feminism is the belief in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes (see www.britannica.com). Feminism is divided into three broad categories: Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism and Radical feminism.

Muslim marriage or Nikaah is conceptually a contract (*Aqd-e-Nikah*) and the wedding is a contract-signing ceremony between two parties. Like any other contract, the *nikahnama* can be modified or added to at the time of the marriage. Lawyers can be brought in to draft it. It may perhaps be better understood if I say it's a pre-nuptial agreement sanctioned by religion. The *Aqd-e-Nikah* not only registers the *mehr* to be paid to the bride but can also contain rights and the logistics if the couple were to divorce (Rizvi 2016).

The Muslim women:

For many non-Muslims, the subject of women in Islam is characterized by the images of deserts and *harems*, *chadors* and *hijabs*, segregation and subordination. Subjugation and second-class citizenship probably best describes the perception of Muslim women in the West, opines Esposito (Esposito 1998).

It is said that women and the family are the foundation of Islamic community and the heart of Muslim society. The Prophet was proud of his descent from the women of his tribe. His wife, Khadeeja, Saadawi writes, was known for her "imposing personality, her independence, both socially and economically since she earned her own living through trade, and the freedom which she insisted upon in her choice of husband." She exercised this

freedom of hers in choosing to marry Mohammad, who later became the last Prophet of Islam. Hazrat Khadeeja is said to have sent one Nafisa as her emissary to the Prophet, who was fifteen years younger to her. It is important here to note that Khadeeja was a widow when she sent Nafisa to propose Mohammad that he marries her.

Nawal el Saadawi is of the opinion that in Islamic cultures, the woman is powerful and not weak, positive and not passive, capable of destroying and not easily destructible and that if anyone needs protection, it is the man rather than the woman. She understands the difference between ideal Islam and lived Islam and thus supports her view by saying:

It is easy to understand why segregation and the veil were imposed upon women at a later stage of Islam, whereas in the earlier stages women were allowed to move about freely and expose their faces for all to see. Even today, some of the Arab countries still maintain the customs that developed in later Islamic society. Segregation and the veil were not meant to ensure the protection of women, but essentially that of men. And the Arab woman was not imprisoned in the home to safeguard her body, her honour, and her morals, but rather to keep intact the honour and the morals of men (Saadawi 1980:99-100).

Barbara Metcalf opines:

For all that, the teachings of the ulema, grounded in Quran and Hadith, were, striking in the significant respect that they did not elaborate a difference between women and men. There was of course the crucial difference of role that placed women squarely in the home. But in terms of essential nature and potential, women and men were regarded as one. The assumption that any patriarchal system must posit notions of a distinctive female nature, of male-female complementarity and, hence, of “opposite sexes” is clearly wrong (Metcalf 1994:7).

The Muslim women can simply be summed up by going through her roots. Eve, who was born of a rib in Adam’s (the first man on earth) body and thus was much weaker than him, accumulated enough strength to provoke Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. What an irony!

A much weaker sex could make Adam go against the commands of Allah. Saadawi maintains that there Eve's role was positive and her personality more powerful than that of Adam who remained passive and followed her word.

Homosexuality among Muslim women:

Novelist Balzac maintains through his narrator that the strongest emotion known is that of a woman for a woman. One bold step in this venture is taken by the film 'Dedh Ishqiya' which is based on Ismat Chughtai's story 'Lihaaf'. In the film, Begum Para's choice of eloping with Muneera even after getting Khalu Jaan's attention and declaration of love for her justifies Jurrat's words,

*Aisi lazzat kahan hai mardon mein
Jaisi lazzat du-guna chapti mein'*

(Where is the pleasure in men, compared to pleasure, *du-guna*, in *chapti*.)

While talking of homosexuality among women, it would be unjust to ignore Rekhti. Rekhti, which is a type of Urdu poetry whose distinguishing features are a female speaker and a focus on women's lives and that *rekhti ghazal* is a conversation chiefly between women, and secondarily between women and men, the distinguishing feature of it, according to Rangin, Insha, Nisbat, Qais, Jaan Sahib and others, is a kind of women narrator who is not interested in marriage or having children, rather she is interested in life's pleasures and her status is often ambiguous whether she is a courtesan or a homely woman and that it focuses on women's amorous relationship with one another (Vanita 2012:4-5).

It can be argued that because of the patriarchal structure of our society in general and the patriarchal-like structure of marriage in Muslim households in particular or at least the fear of it among Muslim women, men seem to have had the favorable chance to lead a carefree sexual life with multiple partners at a time and also a carefree union with same sex, though religion does not permit this but society does not seem to mind. This is quite possible that due to jealousy in the first instance and lack of attention in the second, same sex fantasies develop within women.

Homosexuality in women can be a threat to masculinity. Rather it can be said that women's sexuality can be a threat to masculinity. As Nancy Friday writes that the late 1960s and 1970s was the period of sexual curiosity and that women's lives were changing at the rate of a geometric progression and the exploration of women's sexuality ranked right up there with economic equality. She agrees to the point that men fear women's sexuality. In support of this, she writes:

If man did not fear women's sexuality so much, why would he have smothered it, damning himself to a life with a sexually inert, boring wife, forcing him to go to prostitutes for sex? To combine sex and familial love in one woman made her too powerful, him too little. (Friday, 1991:15)

The films before the 1980s like *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Dil Hi To Hai* (1963), *Ghazal* (1964), *Benazir* (1964), *Palki* (1967), *Bahu Begum* (1967), *Pakeezah* (1972), etc show the female protagonist within the company of her female friends. They would not spare a moment to celebrate, sing and dance. There were songs to celebrate love, with females, always. Muslim females observe purdah but they do not keep purdah among themselves. They dance with each other with close proximity; they sleep on the same couch, chatting; they talk of their love, laugh and tease each other. Within strict purdah, this was the only choice of recreation available to them. However, men keep purdah among themselves. No man is seen dancing with his other male friends exclusively. They dance either in group of males and females together or with the actress but never in the company of just males. Nancy Friday (Friday 1991:41) too writes that while the boys has been learning to be brave and independent outdoors, the girl has been inside practicing togetherness, learning to dance with other girls, rolling up one another's hair, exploring the warm closeness of sleepovers. In these tight friendships, girls retain the symbiotic oneness they had with mother, keeping it warm, rehearsing it over and over again until boys are ready for them. Many of the Mussalmaan ladies entertain women companions, whose chief business is to tell stories and fables to their employer, while she is composing herself to sleep; many of their tales partake of the romantic

cast which characterizes the well-remembered 'Arabian Nights' Entertainments', one story begetting another to the end of the collection. When the lady is fairly asleep the story is stayed, and the companion resumes her employment when the next nap is sought by her mistress, observes Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali in the *zenanas* of nineteenth century Lucknow.

Conclusion:

What distinguishes a women from a man is her biological construction which is natural and her sexuality which is learnt and influenced by environment and/or is culturally defined. Muslim women are dominant as compared to Muslim men. They might be confined to the household but the confinement is generally not forced. They occupy the private space by their free will and rule from the *zenana* quarters and their sexuality definitely plays an important role in it. I would like to add here that I do not see Muslim society as a patriarchal one as one definition of patriarchy says that it is a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it. Muslim society can be termed as male-centric but certainly not patriarchal. I, therefore, conclude contrary to Pierre Bourdieu's [1994] theory which presupposes long standing male dominance over women. The basic opposition in this research paper I developed is the opposition of *female-male* dichotomy that is strongly interconnected with the *subordination-domination* relation, as power relation. The *private sphere* is a relevant example to show the reversal of the conventional idea of male dominance over woman in power structure. Hence, I would conclude with Firdausi's words:

*Women are ever masters when they like,
And cozen with their kindness; they have spells,
Superior to the wand of magician;
And from their lips, the words of wisdom fall
Like softest music on the listening ear-
O, they are matchless in supremacy!*

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