

Marital Bondages and the Enigmas of Women's Independence in Farooqi's *The Story of a Widow*

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ABSTRACT: The present paper, focalizing around the character of Mona in Musharraf Ali Farooqi's *The Story of a Widow*, investigates the sensitive and enigmatic situation of married women. Clashed in claustrophobic relationships the Pakistani married women, the novel attempts to show, happen to endure an acute marital bondage, allowing them very little personal space, often unregistered and unspoken of in Pakistani socio-patriarchal contexts. Drawing its theoretic framework from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, particularly its section titled "Situations", the paper presents the enigmas of female independence and elaborates their social situations, as presented in the novel, that how they get all the more entrapped even after the husband's death. Instead of being independent as widows they are still shackled by their latent sexual desires and to grant themselves their sexual reprieve, they still require a new marital bondage therefore pitting them to an agentic compromise. The paper concludes that for women both social agency and freedom from marital bondage are enigmatic and perplexing enough as they only come with a hefty price to be paid: a complete sacrifice of their sexual selves.

Key Words: Female Independence; Marital Bondage; Musharraf Ali Farooqi; Pakistani Anglophone Fiction; South Asian Anglophone Fiction; *The Story of a Widow*

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Musharraf Ali Farooqi is an acclaimed author, folklorist, and translator of Urdu works. His creative expansion is not limited to any specific literary genre. However, this paper aims to critically study his novel *The Story of a Widow* in terms of marriage in Pakistani society and the bondages entailing it. The focus of the study is the desires and enigmas of women's independence while yoked to the bond of marriage. The novel highlights the problems a married woman has to face in Pakistani society. Years ago, Simone de Beauvoir had observed that marriage should be based on love rather than aiming to enslaving women. *The Story of a Widow*, through the character of its protagonist Mona, elaborates one such case of marital bondage. Mona remained a slave of her first husband Akbar Ahmad and acted according to his whims. Farooqi shows that being a woman Mona has her own desires and hobbies, but she had to compress and contain them. After her husband's death she has time, money, and independence but her status of a widow pits her to certain loneliness and a secondary position in society. To break free from this loneliness she takes the decision to marry Salamat Ali whose courtship is apparently pleasing and liberating. Farooqi, however, shows that for widows the route to independence is complex and enigmatic. Though Mona's second marriage with Salamat Ali seems to grant her independence, personhood, and the fulfilment of slumbering desires, it entails a disaster of her confidence in her decision for second marriage too when she knows for sure that remarriages of widows are achieved more at the cost of their financial positions than for their looks.

Farooqi's *The Story of a Widow* secured only a few reviews let alone the academic research papers. Haroon Ashraf admires Farooqi's portrayal of a widow in Pakistani society for it carries "a strong feminist streak". For him the novel is "contemporary" as it shows a widow "making her own decisions and breaking social taboos" (*The Nation*, August 08, 2016). Saman Saif's academic research paper is a critical comprehension of Farooqi's *The Story of a Widow* in terms of gender vulnerability. Contextualizing her analysis in the theoretic observations made by Virginia Woolf she believes that the author "leads us to a better understanding of class and gender bound restrictions which need to be redressed and looked into with clear-headed objectivity" (12). There is a serious scarcity of critical positions with regard to Farooqi's work and this fact is better expressed by the author himself when he had, in an interview for *Desi Writer's Lounge*, lamented to Afia Aslam that "[n]obody remember[ed his] first book"- *Salar Jung's Passion*- at the

first place let alone the critical discussions. It seems his later works have also carried on with attracting less critical attention. The paper in hand is an attempt to make out for the critical neglect meted out to Musharraf Ali Farooqi. Whereas Ashraf's and Saif's views, the former's from general Pakistani social milieu's perspective and the latter's from the theoretic perspectives of Virginia Woolf, the present paper recalls Simone de Beauvoir's- albeit distant in time but still relevant to point out the unfulfilled women's desires vis-à-vis Pakistani society- perspectives with regard to mid-20th century French women in particular as the starting point for the descriptive analysis of Farooqi's novel. Some of her relevant observations are displayed in the following section of the paper.

As literary research methodologies are mainly concerned with the critical perspectives that are brought to inform literary analysis (Gabriele Griffin 6), the present paper draws its methodological framework from the Feminist Literary Theory by focussing on Simone de Beauvoir's observations, from her seminal work *The Second Sex*, regarding the social situations of married women. She believes that men have mythologized women as 'Other' in order to subordinate them economically. In other words, men want to possess them (161). Women have to face different situations in society as married women, mothers, socialites, prostitutes, and old women. In each role her position remains secondary. Though "[m]arriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society", however, it is with women's progress in economic spheres that her situation improves really which in return somehow upsets the institution of marriage (415). Marriage instead of a bond of love enslaves women and they become "mistress[es] of [their] home[s]" (420) whose physiological destiny is fulfilled only by becoming mothers. With these observations about married women in the background our critical analysis of Farooqi's *The Story of a Widow* aims to highlight the character of Mona as a married woman and a mother whose psychosocial independence remains subservient to a patriarchal society until she breaks free by carving her independent economic status albeit pushing her sexual side to a conscious banishment.

Farooqi's novel *The Story of a Widow* narrates the plight of a widow: Mona in her efforts at gaining independence after her husband's death and chasing a bit of happiness for herself in the new scenario. The setting of the novel is the urban Karachi where Mona, recently widowed, lives. She has two married daughters: Tanya and Amber, also living a settled

life in the same city. Her late husband, Akbar Ahmad, had died a year before his retirement and upset the whole family's finances. Mona, used to looking after the household and the children, struggles to manage expenses as her late husband had never given her a free hand over the financial matters. As if to seek her late husband's guidance she recovers his photograph, enlarges it, frames it and hangs it in the living room where she spent most of her time.

Farooqi tells us in Author's Note section that he got the idea of writing this novel when he had visited an octogenarian gentleman and his third wife whose dead husband's portrait was hanging on the wall right above her new husband's rocking chair. She told Farooqi that at the time of her second marriage she made sure that the portrait hung in her new home because she had memories attached to her previous husband. Her new husband gave the permission. That visit and the presence of the portrait gave Farooqi the idea to write this novel basing on the story of that widow (Author's Note, 248).

Mona, throughout her marital life, remained honestly yoked to her housewife's chains. Apart from taking care of her kids she looked after every need of her husband's from warming his shaving water to keeping ready the toothpicks after dinner. She never thought about herself except her husband and kids. Only Hina, Mona's sister, is privy to her long fellowship of dutifulness to her household. Farooqi highlights through the character of Mona that even if a woman gets independence and the patriarchal pressure of husband is absent in her life, still she cannot deny the presence of male patriarchs in her life. The presence of Akbar Ahmad's portrait and his facial expressions teaches her, rebukes her and appreciates her. It highlights the fact that even in the absence of husband patriarchy is not absent fully.

It is true that the financial control remains in the hands of male members and women are free from all financial tensions yet it cannot be denied that this fact, on the other hand, traps them in a strange fix as they cannot, altogether, freely make any decisions when required of them. Though we are living in a modern world in which women movements are let to thrive still women remain dependent on male patriarchs irrespective of their education and financial liberty. They are still in the clutches of retrogressive and dominating mind-set which adheres to obsolete patriarchal control and leaves them in weak, subordinate, and

dependent position. In *The Story of a Widow* Mona is a classic representation of such a modern woman. Having a good husband (with regard to social status), children, loving sibling and enough money don't give her independence as an individual. Even at the time of her daughter's marriage she persuades her husband and allows her daughter to marry the man she loves. After Akbar's death she gets relatively freer though but in name only as she seems to struggle to come to terms with this newfound independence in making decisions that had been hitherto completely denied to her when her husband was alive.

After a year of her husband's death when Mona is somewhat adjusted in her new life of a widow, she comes to know that her neighbour and friend Mrs. Baig- a widow like her- had a new tenant named Salamat Ali. Though her first encounter with Salamat does not leave a good impression on her she yields to think about him as he constantly shows his interest in her. She does not know how to cope up with this new situation of being the centre of Salamat's attention and care whereas her late husband had never appreciated her looks, feelings, and emotions. All that was important for him was his work. She remembers that when she had asked him as to what he thought about her looks he had replied that with two grown up daughters it was not at all suitable to indulge in such thoughts which had in return infuriated Mona so much (21).

Farooqi through these incidents tries to highlight certain facts that a woman wants love, care and respect from her husband. She is not a servant to take care of household only. She is an individual and needs love and appreciation. Beauvoir also highlights that a woman, in her roles of a wife and a mother, has to face different situations in society and how these roles abhor the way they are being condemned and restricted (415). She further states that marriage instead of being a bond of love enslaves women and they become "mistress[es] of [their] home[s]". Love making is just a service that women offer to men and they in return owe them "some payment" (420). Though Mona's husband left her so much money she is only able to recognise it as a depressing (f)utility. After all what's the use of that money which was accumulated at the cost of her compressed and squeezed desires of youth.

Mona's yet another encounter with Salamat at cinema projects that side of women's hobbies which is usually ignored by husbands. Salamat's courtship of Mona, when she had come to watch the classic movie

Mughal-e-Azam, serves as the counterpart of her late husband's ignoring of his wife's needs of courtship. A woman has to abandon her hobbies and interests due to the patriarchal pressure. In Pakistani society a woman is bound to obey her husband whether she likes his ways or not. Mona has great interest in gardening and watching movies but had to abandon her interests because Akbar Ahmad did not like them. So, she changed her interests to housekeeping only. Even after his death she cannot enjoy those interests fully. Although Mona has accepted her fate and has adjusted herself in the new conditions but still, she remains unhappy. This unveils a reality that even if a woman is independent to take her decisions still the patriarchal culture around makes her more conscious of her actions. Her every action has a forethought that what people will say about her. This social pressure wrings all the energies of women and shatters their confidence. All her encounters with Salamat make Mona more confused as she knows that how much the society becomes strict for a lonely woman and a widow on that. Moreover, her status of being the mother of two married daughters made her position more critical. When Mrs. Baig hands her a letter from Salamat Ali stating his marriage proposal with lots of praise and vows she gets relieved because a fight which was disturbing her mind comes to an end.

Farooqi through this proposal scene tries to convey that when a widow woman is alone any scandal can harm her repute in the society. Moreover, her being a mother-in-law and a grandmother makes her position more accentuated. After Salamat's proposal is broadcast to the family members their reactions are unwelcoming and chiding. Sajid Mir- her guardian since her father's death- the family's surviving chief patriarch, Aunt Aneesa- his wife- and both her daughters take the matter seriously. Mona could not understand how to react. She could never have imagined that her relationship with her daughters will take this turn in life. Sajid Mir starts his commentaries nonstop that how a widow with two married daughters and a grandchild could be so shameless. He is embarrassed and warns her not to breathe this story to anyone as otherwise they would not be able to show their faces to anyone in the society. He reminds Mona that Pakistani society was teeming with such men who are always hunting widows with money. He even threatens her that if the family honour be sullied because of her he would renounce her as his niece and will not allow her to attend his funeral (48). Though Hina and her husband understand Mona to some extent, and they give their support to her servants too are suspicious of her and look at Mona

without any eye contact. One day Noori -the maid, asks her if she was getting married to Mrs. Baig's tenant. Mona is perplexed that the rumours had spread in the town and now it will be difficult for her to manage the affairs. However, she accepts Salamat's proposal conditioned that not only will he shift in her house but that her finances will also be managed by her-self alone. Salamat Ali accepts all the conditions. Though Mona's family submits to her decision of remarrying, Salamat Ali's family does not allow him to marry a widow therefore none from his side comes to attend the marriage function. This alludes to a society in which a widow, if going for a second marriage, is looked down upon as a harlot whereas widowers looking for virgin brides are taken as normal beings.

Mona's courtship with Salamat Ali raises many questions in the mind of readers. Farooqi highlights the important features that if a widow woman decides to marry someone a great uproar comes from all the directions. She is answerable not only to her paternal relations but her own daughters, son in law and their family turns to be cruel patriarchs. Even the servants spread the rumours in different ways. The honour of the woman is at stake. The woman being a widow living a lonely life doesn't disturb the society's social and moral standards. If she meets some accident or health problem no one will be there to take care of her. But when that woman decides to remarry all the patriarchal quarters wake up and become hostile to her all at once. It is important to remember here that Islam duly considers the needs of human nature and that a woman not only needs financial support but also emotional and psychological support. Islam permits a widow to remarry after completing her 'Iddah' (waiting period) which is four months and ten days and in case of a pregnant woman until delivery. Allah Almighty said: "And those who are taken in death among you and leave wives behind - they, [the wives, shall] wait four months and ten [days]. And when they have fulfilled their term, then there is no blame upon you for what they do with themselves in an acceptable manner. And Allah is [fully] acquainted with what you do" [Quran/2/234].

Salamat Ali's ways of expressing care and love for Mona are entirely different from Akbar Ahmad. Salamat being very expressive shows love for her irrespective of the people around. Whereas Mona had remained a very resistive and decent lady in her marital life with Akbar Ahmad so these expressions of Salamat Ali at times make her confused. Moreover,

Akbar Ahmad's portrait, hanging in the lounge, makes her situation more embarrassing. The next morning after the arrival of Salamat Ali to her home she was happy and enjoying when her glance settled at Akbar Ahmad's portrait she became confused as she felt that a sense of inquiry was in his gaze as to ask her what that all was going on under his nose?

During the post-marriage family gatherings Mona still has to hear taunts. At one such gathering Taniya's mother in law talks casually about Akbar Ahmad and his death reminding her of the fact that how in Pakistani society it looks very scandalous if a widow goes for second marriage. Mona being a mother of married daughters and having son in laws and a grandchild has to be very conscious in her actions. It does not look decent if she behaves like a newly married girl of twenty-five. So, she does decent dressing and tries to be very conscious when moving in the family circles for the sake of keeping appearances for her daughters and their in laws. But Salamat Ali is not at all conscious and even takes liberties of touching Mona and praising her openly causing for her immense embarrassment (120).

Mona's new wedded life often makes her compare both her husbands. For at yet another family gathering Salamat Ali asks Mona to wear something bright. Mona finds a saree that Akbar Ahmad had given her which she had never worn because Akbar Ahmad never insisted her to. It gave her a feeling that he had gifted her that saree out of compulsion. There was no emotional attachment, so she had placed it in the trunk with anger. Salamat Ali when comes there where Mona was struggling with her memories, he at once looks at the saree and appreciates it and requests her to wear it for him. The behaviours of both the husbands collide in her mind. So, she takes the saree and puts it on. She was looking beautiful in that saree and Salamat Ali openly praises her beauty. Mona feels very happy because it is in the women's nature that she wants appreciation and if her feelings are suppressed then she loses her confidence in herself. On the departure of the guests she just glanced at Akbar Ahmad's portrait who was staring her with annoyance.

All this highlights the fact that for a widow woman with grandchildren it is very difficult to cope with new roles. Beauvoir says that "narcissism is the fundamental attitude of all women because the fact is that narcissism is a process of self-identification" (597). Women always want to identify themselves first with that they want. But her happiness lies in the hands

of patriarchy which imposes its beliefs and concepts onto her. As Mona feels delight in the ways Salamat Ali treats her but he over-does sometimes soliciting equally emotional reactions from her therefore making her situation awkward within the given norms of society for the women of her age in her position.

When Salamat Ali takes Mona out for a beach side excursion she even does not mind his getting drunk there. As he pours some scotch for her too, she surrenders though she had never tasted it before. The food and the sea environment give Mona a refreshing happiness that she had longed for all her life. Akbar Ahmad being a silent and serious man did not like such outings. Salamat Ali's personality is a total contrast to her first husband as he loves adventure, cooking and praising Mona. Her whole life spent with Akbar Ahmad was boring to the core and she being a good wife followed his routines. She could not even speak freely with Akbar Ahmad. Farooqi through these incidents shows that every individual wants to live a happy life. One has feelings, joys, excitements and pleasures of one's own which are suppressed because the partner doesn't like them, or they don't match the partner's taste. Mona truly represents such an individual. Even when she gets independence after the death of her previous husband she always feels confused because the excitements of her new wedded life are incongruous to her age. Now if she lets herself lose and enjoys her life the way she wanted her whole life when she was young she would become a laughing stock for the society as such excited and anxious life does not befit an old lady with two married daughters and a grandchild.

After a year of their marriage Mona was a transformed personality. When she moves in the society or is on road, she starts feeling that people were looking at her. The gaze and gestures of people have some obscenity in them. All Mona's sexual desires, occasionally causing her flushing and embarrassed moments in her life, have found a niche in Salamat Ali. Her relationship with Salamat Ali has stirred in her the sensuality that had been suspended in her life. Her sexual side had lain dormant because it was not even roused ever. But with the arrival of Salamat Ali in her life her slumbering erotic desires and emotions were rekindled. Her sex life gives her the pleasure which was missing in her previous marriage. Akbar Ahmad's love making had remained at best conscious and emotionless. He never cared how she looked. Sex was more of an activity for him than a desire. Mona often felt that all the

poets with their seamless expressions of beauty and passionate love were mere frauds and liars.

With Salamat Ali's caretaking of Mona's sexual and emotional side she too starts answering his gestures with the same wavelength of emotions. She starts taking care of her health, body and skin. She starts using age control creams which she never did before. This also highlights the fact that a woman wants love and admiration from her husband and reciprocates with the same. Islam allows married women the conjugal love and happiness under certain codes of conduct. And a man who expresses his love for his wife is awarded with reward (sawab) from Allah Almighty. To marry and have marital relations are Sunnat-e-Rasool (SAW).

As Mona's spending starts to overreach, her daughters get annoyed with her. Tanya seems to be more annoyed as she tells Amber that Mona has been shedding money by buying an expensive car whereas she could have bought a small one enough for two. Then she informs Amber about the transaction of three hundred thousand rupees that Mona had lent to Salamat Ali to deal with his financial problems he was facing lately. Mona reacts to this forcefully and tells them that she will give them their share and then will never allow them to utter a single word about her newly wedded life. Moreover, she also tells them about all their late father's deceptions that he had done to her life and personality. She reminds Tanya how she had helped her when her husband was not working. She makes her recall the time when she had told Akbar Ahmad about Tanya's needy circumstances and her late father had become furious that they had no money for themselves even so how could they give it to their daughter? And that Mona had given her own savings to Tanya then because she was in trouble. She shouts with anger that their father always asked her to save money and whenever she had asked for some money he had said: "No! We must save! We must save!" as for him "An outing, a picnic, a dinner alone somewhere was too much to ask!" (163). Now when he is no more, and the money is there what is the use of all this? And now if still she cannot spend it on herself then what will be the use after her death. Both of her daughters are astonished at this reactionary side of their mother's personality. Mona makes the papers and distributes the property according to law. We can see that this bold agentic change in Mona's character has arrived after her marriage with Salamat Ali.

However, her late husband's portrait starts to haunt her. On the occasion of the second death anniversary of Akbar Ahmad, when she hangs the garland of flower on his portrait, she is shocked to feel as if he was gazing at her with a scolding squint. She takes the garland back, wraps it in a shopping bag and discards it. She starts avoiding his portrait completely. The presence of the portrait in the living room gives a feeling as even after his death he is there. He is looking at the activities of his wife. Mona tries to avoid an eye contact. The portrait's presence and its squinting gaze are symbolic of the constantly scrutinizing patriarchy. In this case even when it has lost its authority it still reminds her of its diabolic presence.

Mona's second marriage, however, is not completely free of domestic issues. Salamat Ali's behaviour distracts at times from the normal. He comes home late at night and often drunk. Though at times he is seriously irritating she stays put. Once when in a private music party, he is so drunk that he puts the glass on his head and starts dancing like a female dancer with the shimmering hips. Everyone looks at him in awe as he was a laughingstock for almost everyone. Insulted publicly Mona feels as if someone had drained every drop of blood from her. As for his finances she knows that he wouldn't be able to pay back the loan on time taken from her, but she never asks. Despite everything Mona feels a sense of contentment and happiness which was missing in her life. Even when Mona is revealed to the fact that her new husband is nothing more than a cheap fake and a fraud, still she wants to give him a second chance. A gambler, a drunk and above all a bankrupt since a year ago, Salamat Ali has no registered company. Jafar, her son-in-law, hands her a file with all the proofs. Though her daughters want her to divorce him she cannot do it as she still so much doesn't want all this to end. She, instead, asks him to promise never to come home late and drunk.

The news of Salamat Ali's reputation spreads like fire and Mona knows inwardly that her reputation- as Akbar Ahmad's widow, mother of two happily married daughters and grandmother to a grandchild- everything, was at stakes. Hina asks her to sign the divorce papers but she cannot. She needs time to think as she lurks in the state of indecisiveness. She finds herself in a depressive state of mind. Meanwhile there occurs an incident that reveals her new husband's motives to her completely. Mona is unable to withstand Salamat Ali's carelessness when, in a state of

heavy drunkenness, he runs into a car accident with her beside him. This accident was enough to tell her what she was about to lose. She is ready now to divorce Salamat Ali. He demands some money which she pays immediately. She decides to live independently without any patriarchal pressures. She learns driving just to avoid her dependence on her daughters. Farooqi gives an insight through the character of Mona that how society and patriarchy react towards a widow. What remains in the centre is the institution of patriarchy not the individual let alone a female individual on that. Both instances of Mona's marriages are more of situations of bondage and servitude. Mona, in neither of her marriages, is completely free. First marriage with Akbar Ahmad is sexually repressive albeit granting her a respectable social status related to her husband's repute. The second marriage with all its sexual latitude deprives her of her status of a respectable senior citizen guilty of being involved wantonly in an unworthy and untimely marriage. Even this second marriage is not completely freeing one as her second husband wants to mould her personality according to his whims by fettering Mona to his libertine indulgences. In both her marriages we find Mona catching up with the desires of her husbands than her real independence making her equal to them. Simone de Beauvoir, stressing the importance of love, believes in equal rights for spouses. She concludes her book *The Second Sex* with the optimistic approach that love can become ever more authentic and fulfilling if women were better treated on equal terms across all societies of the world.

The paper projects Musharraf Ali Farooq's novel *The Story of a Widow* as an explication of Pakistani married woman's situation in terms of marital bondage contextualizing the observations made by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. The novel unveils the expectations of society from a married woman. Farooqi, through the character of Mona, showcases the conflict within a woman for either fulfilling her sexual desires and her longing for social and financial independence or yielding to the expectations of the patriarchal society. The resolution of this conflict is enigmatic and complex as it may result in severe heart-breaking as in Mona's case who, as Farooqi shows, passes through the stages of a married woman to a widow and then to a married woman again by remarrying but the happiness of married life balanced by desires and financial autonomy still remains a dream. Pakistani marriages at the most, if allowed to make a sweeping statement, are fellowships in bondage and servitude. The cost of breaking free is too much for women:

the solitary life of a widow or a spinster. The sexually appeased marital life and financial independence cannot exist together side by side. The paper, by showcasing Mona's enigmatic plight of finding the marital bliss in both her marriages, contributes its meagre bit to the body of meanings ascribed so far to Farooqi's novel and leaves margin for future researchers to contribute by analysing the novel from South Asian Feminist or Muslim Feminist theoretic perspectives that have remained out of present study's scope.

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