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Weakness of Faith and the Silenced Exploitation of Women in

Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi's "A Lament"

A large number of women are exploited by the fake saints (peers) in Pakistan. Though the matter requires social, ethical, religious as well as familial attention, our society keeps its eyes shut in this regard. The victims are silenced and the exploitative events are rarely voiced. The paper intends to explore the reasons for this aphonic exploitation of women through an analysis of a short story "A Lament" by Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi in the light of Yael Danieli's theory of "conspiracy of silence". Narrating the story of Ranu, a young girl exploited at the hands of a peer (saint), Qasmi unravels the horrors of some of the darkest of social evils committed in the name of spirituality practiced through fake religious rituals.

Key words: Aphonic, exploitation, conspiracy, silence, fear.

The tragedy of Ranu, the protagonist of the story "A Lament", is misunderstood and misrepresented by all around her but no one is able to voice the right source of her misery. The

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fake haloes of spirituality forbid the people to articulate the experience at any forum. The whole affair thus becomes unspeakable i.e. something which no one can talk of clearly. The questions remain: what is the responsibility of the society around? Why the parents are not sensitive enough to see what endangers the life of their daughter? Why is religion misunderstood by these people? Is ignorance the real reason behind such sad events? Who has to break this "conspiracy of silence"? In a quest to answer these questions, the research aims to bring to light the fear and a sense of insecurity which underlie the weakness of faith in people such as these. It is also reinforced that there is a strong need to eradicate this fear of insecurity from the minds and hearts of the girls as well as their parents thereby making them realize that when the belief is blind, the consequent rites performed would be unspeakable.

The primary focus of this research is to unfold the horrors of fake claims / beliefs of spirituality and to identify the grounds for cultivations of such blind beliefs. The focus will remain upon an emphasis of the significance of the social, ethical, religious as well as familial roles to avoid exploitation of women. Furthermore, this paper studies the sense of fear and insecurity as the greatest reason for gendered exploitation and the aphonic victimization of a particular gender i.e. women. For this purpose, this paper aims to deconstruct the muted discourse of the exploited women.

"A Lament" by Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi is the lament of a mother at the death of her daughter. The story of the girl, named Ranu, is revealed through her mother's narrative of her life events at the funeral of Ranu. The mother starts the narration from the time when Ranu was born and that how her beauty became a point of concern for her parents, especially her father. The narrative then shifts to a time when Ranu had become an extremely beautiful seventeen years old girl, who was regarded not just because of her physical beauty but also because of her melodious voice. This physical beauty was coupled with a very strong spiritual aspect. It seemed as if she had a special connection with God. It was believed in her neighborhood that she can cure the sick. More than anyone else her father was aware of the imminent danger to his gifted daughter.

Sain Hazrat Shah, the descendant of Sain Dulhe Shah (a saint of great acclaim) stands for the fake spiritual representation in the story. His status as the spiritual healer is reinforced by the weak faith of the people around him. He is surrounded by the people who invite such fake saints to exploit them. These people believe in blessing the jugs

of water by simply blowing into them. They pay homage to the tomb by leaving off the most precious of their belongings there. By doing so they believe that they will be absolved of all the sins they have committed in their lives. Ranu's parents go to the extent of leaving their daughter on the tomb for all the three days of *Urs*. The saint thrives upon all such fake ideals.

The weakness of the faith of people in general and of Ranu's parents in specific, is highlighted when this fake saint invites Ranu for the three-day *urs*, and insists that she stays back alone for the course of the *urs*, apparently to recite Quran on the tomb. Later on, sexually exploited by the Sain, Ranu dies while waiting for Sain Dulhe Shah to come out of the grave to punish the evil hand. This is important to note here, that even after being exploited, Ranu still believes in the supernatural intervention of the dead saint to come out of his tomb and punish Sain Hazrat Shah. This also is significant that even when there are clear clues as to what must have happened to poor Ranu, no one including her parents mention the evil or the evil-doer. Though such cases of victimization require social, ethical, religious as well as familial attention, our society often chooses to keep its eyes shut in this regard. The victims are silenced and the exploitative events are rarely voiced. The tragedy of Ranu is misunderstood and misrepresented by all around her but no one is able to voice the right source of her misery. The fake haloes of spirituality forbid the people to say anything about it. The whole affair thus becomes unspeakable i.e. something which no one can talk of clearly.

Earlier, everyone around Ranu, including her parents, believed in the supernatural powers of Ranu. Her mother herself believed that the water blessed by Ranu "for the sake of Sain Dulhe Shahji" (Qasmi, 1992, p. 82) had curative essence. "...the sick got well, the bad became good, the irreligious devout" (Qasmi 82). Though they believed in the spiritual powers of their daughter, Ranu's parents could still not bring themselves to say no to Sain Dulhe Shah. They were afraid of refusing anything to the fake saint. The mother reflects, "Who had the nerve to defy the order of Sain Dulhe Shahji?" (Qasmi 83). They believe that "... Sain Dulhe Shahji was a master of terrible powers." (Qasmi 83). Their belief in his terrible powers was clearly mixed with extreme fear. All of their beliefs, however, are found upon heresy. The mother reflects, "If someone said anything at all against him during his life, he turned them into ashes with just one glance. And now, after his death, it is said that if any evil is done in or around his shrine, his holy grave opens and his blessed hand emerges from inside." (Qasmi 83). So the blindness of their faith made them believe that his terrible powers include turning someone to ashes just with a single glance. The fear is so deeply ingrained in their souls that they keep on fearing the saint even after his death. The mother tells, "The evildoer is dragged from wherever he happens to be and dies then and there, with the *Sain's* blessed hand wrapped around his throat. Then the hand returns inside the grave, and the cracks meld back together as if the grave had never opened." (Qasmi 83). This is ironic that the poetic justice is expected to come from the dead *Sain* and not from God. It is this blindness in their faith that takes them to their doom.

Ranu's father is worried for Ranu from the moment of her birth. He tells his wife, "God only gives girls this beautiful to those with whom he is very angry" (Qasmi 81). This is another misunderstood religious belief. The mother narrates the moment of Ranu's birth: "He was looking at you the way a sparrow looks at a snake." (Qasmi 81). The fact that her father is compared with a sparrow highlights the vulnerability of Ranu's father. Being the father of a beautiful girl, Ranu's father spends his life under the shadow of a continuous fear. The mother narrates: "Seeing your beauty, he had become frightened. He passed the next sixteen or seventeen years of his life fearful of you." (Qasmi 81). The problem is that instead of using this cautious approach to save their daughter, they help this fear to grow into a blind faith in the retributory hand of the saint which will protect the honour of their daughter.

Ranu's parents may be held responsible for the tragedy that happens to her at the end. First, they are the ones who have introduced the girl to the blind Faith in the spiritual powers of the fake saints. They help her to conform to the normative behavior towards these saints. They then take the girl to pay homage to tombs and finally leave her alone for a three day *urs*. They do not consider the idea of getting Ranu married, thinking of her as a lifetime devotee. Lastly, they themselves leave her in the care of the supposedly 'blessed' saints. This is strange that a father who has always been afraid of his daughter being exploited, ignores the subject of her marriage and leave his youthful daughter alone on the tomb for three days. Ranu's parents, like all others around them, think their daughter has devoted their life for Quran. "It seems she has given up everything for the sake of God." (Qasmi 83). This is a critique on the cultural practices of the people like them who, in the name of religion, sacrifice their daughters and their happiness and decide a fate for them not predestined by God but by the false beliefs and practices.

Other than fear, ignorance is also one of the greatest hindrance in the realization of truth. Because the people are ignorant of the true beliefs, they do not know how to fill in the void that may be created as a result of

their disbelief in the false religious practices. Instead of seeking guidance from Quran, they line up to get their jugs of water blessed by Ranu. They fail to understand the true use of the religious resources they have. This in itself leads to misrepresentation. Ignorance is also one of the greatest reasons for silencing the malpractices. The normative gendered social beliefs make women the easy targets of these misrepresented and ignorant false social and religious practices.

The economic position of Ranu's parents added to the already diminished status which their ignorance and blind faith had caused. For instance, after Ranu's tragedy, when the parents try to approach either the saint or his family, they could meet only the servants of the family. The "robbed mother and father" (Qasmi 85) move from one place to the other but are disallowed the access to the high ups. The mother narrates, "Sobbing, he went straight off to Sain Hazrat Shah, and I followed behind him crying. But the servants told us that Sainji locks himself up in a private room and sits for several days reciting special prayers immediately following the urs, and does not see anyone." (Qasmi 85). The irony lies in the fact that even the women of the house are ready to help them. They are rather accomplice. "I wanted to go and see the women, but servants at the gate told me that the ladies were already quite upset because of Ranu's condition, and it would be a sin to trouble them more." (Qasmi 85). The concept of sin is used here to further terrify the people who are already victims of fear.

It is interesting to note that the true victim i.e. Ranu has no voice in the whole story. The reader starts reading the story when Ranu is already dead. It is through the mother's perspective that the reader attempts to approach her character. In her mother's words, when she opens her mouth before the tragedy, it was only to recite Quran. She has not even for a single time being referred to as a girl by her mother. The mother always referred to her as a 'divine light' (82), a 'saintly daughter' (84) or an 'angelic daughter' (84). After the tragedy, the mother quotes the daughter directly but what comes out repetitively is only her expectations founded on the blind faith that she has been fed upon since her childhood. Ranu says, "I won't leave until Sain Dulhe Shahji's holy tomb opens and his blessed hand comes out...the holy tomb will open if not today, then tomorrow. In a month, a year, or in two years, whenever, but the holy tomb will definitely open and the blessed hand will definitely come out." (Qasmi 85). The falsity of the belief becomes all the more poignant because of the fact that Ranu's experience has not even taught her the lesson. The use of the word 'definitely' here, refers to a special emphasis on the strength of her belief.

Ranu's resort to the dead Sain Dulhe Shah also reflects her fears of not being understood by a world around her, a world ruled by a blind belief system. Kelly McKinney quotes Emil, the clinical director at Haven, who talks about "countertransference" (McKinney, 2007, p. 273) feelings in the ones who listen to the traumatic victims. He writes, "These reactions include "indifference, avoidance, and denial." (McKinney 273). The people around Ranu also react to her condition with an indifference, denial, avoiding (consciously or unconsciously) the spring of her misery. In doing so, these people join the 'conspiracy of silence'. According to Danieli this "collective silence... is complicit with violence" (McKinney 275). In this light, all people around Ranu are complying with the violence practiced upon her. Their role is important because "They join history in denying the truth of violence and the truth of human suffering. (McKinney 276). The situation would have been different if these people would have behaved in a different way. "...sometimes survivor stories are not believed or are negated or silenced. This may be more likely to happen when master narratives of truth are produced in the interests of a state or other political actors who are perpetrators of violence and repression or who otherwise have an agenda that would be threatened by these testimonies..." (McKinney 287). The people around Ranu escape providing this testimony by propagating the idea that she is possessed. Involving a third party that is invisible also, helps the strengthening of the normalized discourse on the subject. In this way, each word that comes out of Ranu's mouth is displaced, distrusted and therefore disregarded. The whole process, thereby, involves the politics of discourse formations. The discursive constructions are directly related to the power structures, the structures that are formative of social institutions.

The victims, in such cases, realize that the world around would not be ready to listen or comprehend their trauma. Danieli writes about this denial, "The silence imposed by a world that did not want to hear them intensified their sense of isolation, loneliness, and mistrust of society." (Danieli, 2009, p.51). This is also what happens to Ranu who accepts the power of the conspiring efforts of silencing her. The last words of dying Ranu are significant to understand this conspiracy of silence maintained by all the social institutions around her: "'Mother. Father. Who knows why the tomb didn't open.'" (Qasmi 87). The element of incomprehension in her words is bitter and leads her to believe that maybe she herself is the evil doer. It still is hard for her to believe in the falsity of her beliefs. She says, "Anyway, the case has been decided, whether justice was done or not. All right, so I am the sinner. You made us wait a long time, Sain Dulhe Shahji." (Qasmi 87). It is for the first time in the story that one feels that Ranu is going to confront the truth but again silence prevails, this time a permanent one. She says, "Now, on Judgment day,

when we are all standing before God... when we are all standing before God... before God... God..." You were quiet after that, and you have been quiet ever since." (Qasmi 87). Somehow, the pronouncement of evil still remains unvoiced. The lament of the mother, in the form of a reverie, also just hints at the fate of her daughter at the hands of a power which seems to be beyond their or anyone else's control. The exploitation / violence evades being caught even in words.

By highlighting the silencing of the evil deeds committed by the fake spiritual representatives, this research has examined the factors responsible for the exploitation of women. The findings suggest an immediate attention on social, ethical, religious and familial level is required to deal with this form of social evil. This research also reinforces the fact that there is a strong need to eradicate the fear of insecurity from the consciousness of the girls as well as their parents thereby making them realize that when the belief is blind, the consequent rites performed are bound to be unspeakable.

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