

Objectification of Women: Islamic Insight

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Abstract

Islam as a religion of peace ensures provision of equal rights to all the humans irrespective of their gender. Women not only enjoy the liberty of life within the parameters of values as laid by the Quran and Sunnah but at the same time, they also own the right of self-respect, esteem and treatment as humans. Treating women as mere objects for sex, or as mere "other" which devoid them of their due rights is strictly prohibited in Islam. The paper in hand highlights that how objectification of women is condemned by Islamic theology with special reference to Martha Nussbaum's theory of Objectification being applied on Daniyal Mueenuddin's Short Story, Saleema. However, it is pertinent to mention that the paper only concerns feudal cultures and thus, it is not a representative of the entire Pakistani society.

Keywords: sexual objectification, instrumentality, fungibility, inertness, violability, subjectivity

Introduction

In feudal cultures, women are objectified as a result of which they are unable to express their true and authentic selves. Men in the society consider these women as mere tools for sex who can be violated and devoid of their due right of expression. In such societies, women are treated as men's commodities who govern them; they (the women) can be owned, bought and sold. This patriarchal attitude makes women weaker in the society and they no longer complaint or question. Women have all the agencies but still they are thought as lacking in certain agency or agencies which results in their sexual objectification. Besides, women are thought as interchangeable with other things or objects who lack autonomy over their selves and their bodies. The paper aims at highlighting portrayal of women as mere sex tools in patriarchal societies and its condemnation in Islam. Besides, this paper aims to bring out the socio-cultural perspective of the sexual objectification of women in patriarchal societies. It is seen that sexual objectification leads to disruption of moral, ethical, biological and psychological torture. By creating a social awareness through this paper, it is intended to reinforce the importance of authentic selves in women through self-actualization and self-determination

The Western Contradictory Behavior and Inter-Religions Dialogues

from Islamic lens and vision.

Objectification is a social philosophy which deals with the treatment of any living being as an object. Objectification is an act of dehumanization which paves the way for manipulation and control. Martha Nussbaum enumerated seven postulates that are representative of the theory of objectification. This theory aims to explain the extreme tendency of equating people with objects and further probes into the negative consequences of such a mechanism. According to her, a person is objectified if he or she is used as a tool for someone else's purposes; treated as lacking in autonomy or self-determination; lacking in agency or activity or being interchangeable with other objects. Similarly, as per her conception of Objectification a person is objectified when he or she is thought as violable or who could be owned, bought or sold.

Since objectification can be of different types and when it involves sexual objectification of women, it becomes cyclically detrimental for the society. This paper is an attempt at delineating that mechanism of sexual objectification which renders women devoid of autonomy and subjectivity. "Sexual objectification, in the broadest terms, involves (at least) treating people as things" (Stock 191). Sexual objectification of women means to treat women as tools for satisfaction of men's purposes; expressing them as having no autonomy over their own selves; treating them in a way that they can be owned, bought or sold; denying their subjectivity or thinking of them as violable which in all ways is contrary to the teachings of Islam.

Literature Review

In this world, all human beings are born equal. No human, whether male or female, is crowned with higher status. Apart from world's largest religions, the international laws and jurisprudences also guide us to treat humans as equal, regardless of their sex or gender. Exceedingly, the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" which is an international document and is adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, reveres equal rights of citizenship and liberty for all 'human-beings'. No law in world favours men over women and vice versa. However, it is an unfortunate dilemma of the world that women are treated as inferior to the men. From different deals to language and from practical life to literature, the expression provided to women is that of sex objects merely and or toys for men's satisfaction. This objectification of women is a matter that feminists notice with concern.

Objectification of women means to consider women as mere commodities for use ignoring their own identity as a person or contributor of the society. Google dictionary defines objectification as an action of degrading someone to the status of mere objects. Women are objectified in literature by being considered as mere sex objects for the men. A researcher Maria Nawaz argues that some feminists have called objectification as "disgraceful to women", while others have supported objectification on grounds that it leads

to empowering women. As she says, "Objectification is discussed by feminists in two different ways. First group calls objectification as disgraceful and cause of gender inequalities that reinforce the ideas generated by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalysis. However, the other group of feminists takes this objectification as an important idea in their theory and source of women empowerment. Cixous also believes in female sexuality in literature and considers it essential to challenge the stereotypical masculinize writings." (Nawaz)

This patriarchal attitude is not new. The world has been living with this conception since the very first day. Dr. Shaheen Khan, Dr. Rasib Mahmood and Kainat Zafar review this matter with profundity. They explain, "Eve, the mother of humanity, has also not been exempted from the patriarchal attitude of men even in the postmodern age. In Christian mythology, Eve is held responsible for the fall of man" (Dr. Shaheen Khan). Therefore, not only the present day women are being subjugated but it has been a practice since the inception of world.

Islam ensures protection of women as, "a woman's chastity has to be respected and protected under all circumstances, whether she belongs to our own nation or to the nation of an enemy, whether we find her in the wild forest or in a conquered city; whether she is our co-religionist or belongs to some other religion or has no religion at all", (Mawdudi). It highlights that how women are guarded by Islam. Islamic lens sees at objectification of women as something condemnable and ugly attitude and guides the mankind to refrain from it.

In Daniyal Mueenuddin's works, women are portrayed as objects of sex. Mueenuddin was born of a Pakistani father and an American mother. After spending his early childhood in Pakistan, he moved to the United States of America for the purpose of education. As he belonged to an upper-class ruling family, he interacted with rural lower class during his early days. Thus, he has the potential of portraying characters amicably, duly giving them a real-life touch. Umama Shah states, "He (Daniyal Mueenuddin) portrays the characters very efficiently both from upper and lower class in his stories because he has seen them all closely" (Shah).

Shah adds on to explain personal and sexual agencies where, "...personal agency refers to an individual's ability to act in a way to accomplish his/her goals. When we have a certain agency in our life, it is to have the capacity to behave or act in away that will give us the result which we desire. The sexual agency in women is about the complex group of rights, knowledge, skills, personal authority and abilities women posses in order to get what they want (to) accomplish" (Shah). The researcher while explaining sexual agency in women in Daniyal Mueenuddin's Short Stories from "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders" - the eight interlinked stories that express lives of people who are in some way associated with an aging landlord of Lahore city, K. K. Harouni says that marriage and sex are the major areas of

The Western Contradictory Behavior and Inter-Religions Dialogues

interest to link men to women in this book. As she says, "Women in Mueenuddin's stories use sex to prey on men" (Shah). She continues, "it is their strongest weapon" (Shah). She believes that the women have suffered the most in these stories by Daniyal Mueenuddin "as they did in the great writings of the European novels on the 19th century". She argues that throughout the stories of Daniyal Mueenuddin, the readers get to know that the writer has "established" a belief that the women always try to become socially stable; and in order to gain this stability, they have their body to offer to men. She continues by adding that the men have been portrayed as inconsiderate of their women; they only care for their "carnal desires". As long as their "carnal or physical desires" are fulfilled by the women, they (the men) care about women, if not – they don't. She adds, "One of the most terrible loss for a woman is the loss of her virtue, when she don't (doesn't) protect her virtue, she becomes vulnerable and is doomed" (Shah). This is indicative of a fact that how it is important for a woman to protect her virtue and chastity. It is important to quote Prof. Muhammad Rafi here who believes that the loss of wealth is not a loss, loss of health is a smaller loss, however, loss of character means that everything is lost. (Rafi 7) She ends her argument by saying that in Daniyal Mueenuddin's short stories one gets to see that not only the women present their bodies to the men, but, on the other hand, they are made to offer their bodies to them that too against their own wills.

Discussion

Daniyal Mueenuddin, an American-Pakistani writer who was born in 1963, writes in English. He has authored a collection of interrelated short stories under the title, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders". This collection has eight short stories in totality which have been translated into thirteen languages. Besides, the collection gathers multiple honours and critical acclaim. This particular work of him helped him in bagging The Story Prize and Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

"Saleema" is one of the eight interconnected short stories of Daniyal Mueenuddin's book, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders". Like his other twelve short stories of the same book, women have been objectified in "Saleema" as well. The story revolves around sexual themes and denies autonomy of women making them violable, thus, disabling them to express their authentic selves. Saleema is the main character of this short story who hails from a lower-class family. She earns her bread and butter by working at an aging landlord K. K. Harouni's place.

As the story begins, the objectification of women in the short story "Saleema" is a recurrent theme throughout and the readers are able to know that Saleema was born and brought up in a household where "...her mother slept around for money and favours" (Mueenuddin 1). This indicates that Saleema's mother only had her body to present it to the men for "money and favours". This specifically highlights that how women are considered as tools

for men's sexual satisfaction. It is, nevertheless, explaining that how women are helpless in a patriarchal society; that even they do not have a hold of such small things; that they have to offer their bodies to the men to get hold of small favours and a few coins. The continual sexual objectification of women results in a very low self-esteem which plays a pivotal role in the negation of realizing their true potential as authentic selves.

Saleema is treated as a tool for satisfaction of men who work at K.K. Harouni's place. The cook Hassan, other cooks and Rafiq assault her to a level that she loses autonomy over herself and she is unable to express herself. Eventually, everything seems normal to her; the exploitation, harassment and ill-treatment. This practice is repeated on daily routines that in the end, she adopts herself with it. She neither objects nor stops men from harassing her. In short, she lacks subjectivity. This brutal treatment and harassment lead to her inability of knowing her true self and expressing her emotions; the actual being in her. Saleema had been used as an instrument to satisfy the carnal desires of the men around her. This kind of lowly life that Saleema was forced to live owed itself largely to her drug addicted husband who had lost his job of a peon in an office. Among others, Hassan has been the one who repeatedly objectified her. His remarks like, "... "Ask for it my duckling", said Hassan" (Mueenuddin 01), and "I need to fatten you up, I like them plump", (Mueenuddin 01), are clearly indicative of the fact that Hassan viewed Saleema only as a body and not as an individual. Hassan only cared for what he liked and would not take into consideration the choices of Saleema.

In feudal cultures, women are considered as toys. They are exploited by feudals, their children which is against the spirit of Islam. These men do not treat them as humans, but as 'things'. They are used as tools for sex, work, assistance and when exploited and used, they are sold for money irrespective of their will or choices. Saleema is also used by a landowner's son of her village, as ".....and she herself at fourteen became the plaything of a small landowner's son" (Mueenuddin 01) points out at how Saleema is instrumentalized; which means "treatment of another as a tool for one's own purposes" (Calogero 575). The use of metaphor "plaything" is expressive of men's mentality in a male dominated society. This shows that how women are thought as mere objects for and of the men. Moreover, this also highlights that how men in different shapes and family institutions (like fatherhood, brotherhood, uncle-hood et cetera) exploit and misuse women. It can be seen that how a "small" landowner's son exploits a girl who is just fourteen years of age. The landowners and the feudal lords let their children play with girls like Saleema to develop their perverted sense of manhood which is turn considered as a sense of pride in feudal societies. A report shows that more than six kids were sexually abused in a period in Pakistan out of which 53% were females (The News International). While the fact remains that feudal societies, which are basically patriarchal in nature, have men who are inconsiderate of women's individual identities. Saleema after having been

The Western Contradictory Behavior and Inter-Religions Dialogues

exploited by son of the local landowner is given away to a city bright who further sells her for some money and this does not include her will. Holy Prophet P.B.U.H. used to be considerate of his wives' feelings who would not only take their of their respect but would help them in carrying out domestic chores as well.

This is the story of a family and its servants, but this expresses the mentality of men in a feudal culture. Men violate them on multiple levels, physically, emotionally and psychologically. The worst form of damage that arises out of such violation is the one in which the woman is made to believe as if she had been the one who gave herself too easily, as "The cook, Hassan had gotten everything from her, as always she'd given it too soon." (Mueenuddin 01). This can be understood that how Saleema was exploited by a cook; who not only exploited her body but abused her psychologically as well. "Everything" indicates that she was left with nothing; neither her physical body nor her psychological being. Even then it is believed that it was Saleema who had offered her body very soon to the men. The story adds that since the men had all the strings of the basic human needs in their hands so Saleema was dependent upon the even for food and shelter. Attaining basic human needs made Saleema to get objectified by all the men in household. Nevertheless, women do not have their own identity in this story: they are thought and expressed as dependent upon the men; be them from their families or workplaces. The male dominated society believes that women can be protected by the men, "...but the easy days were over, now she had no one to protect her", (Mueenuddin).

Saleema was instrumentalized by her own husband for economic prosperity. Since he had lost his job of peon in an office, he had no other way to purchase drugs but to present his wife, Saleema, to the exploitative feudal society. Therefore, he used Saleema as a tool who used earn money in order to buy drugs for her husband. "Though he knew right away that she slept with Hassan the cook.....and next day as usual he hungrily took the few rupees she gave—to buy twists of rocket pills, his amphetamine addiction", (Mueenuddin 01). He failed to protect his wife and her honour. This inconsiderateness made her feel insecure which resulted in her lack of subjectivity and expressing her actual self. She had lost the ability of questioning or raising her voice.

As has been discussed earlier that violability can occur at physical level, emotional level, psychological level as well as spatial level. Personal human space, apart from food is one of the basic human rights. In this story we get to see that Saleema was supposed to use the same washroom as men. The feudal system essentially being capitalistic in nature does not address such basic requirements with regards to gender difference. "She didn't even have a place to herself for that, she shared the same toilet as the men" (Mueenuddin). What makes it important is that she would confront men in that toilet. The lines, "Stay in there, my clothes are on the wall. I am just

finished”, followed by “You can go to hell too. I am done with you fuckheads” indicate that how problematic it was for Saleema to use the same toilet as men, while, the men - on the other hand - paid no heed to it and nobody bothered to fix this issue for her and indeed, other female employees of K.K. Harouni’s family or mansion.

Nussbaum next discusses ownership which is a theme prevalent in this shorty story by Daniyal Mueenuddin. The men think of them, the women, as their commodities which can be purchased by paying some money and thrown after use. This can be understood by the lines that follow in which Saleema is taken by a city bright who sells her without her agreement for some money. Saleema later on learns that she was even sold to the city bright who took her to Lahore. The women do not even have a control on their own lives. They are controlled and managed by men and it is up to the men that whether they want to sell them or use them. This attitude and thinking of women make women rigid and addicted to sex. It is Saleema who becomes sensual and romantic as a result of this treatment. “These experiences had not cracked her hard skin, but made her sensual, unscrupulous - and romantic.” (Mueenuddin, 2010)

Conclusion and Findings

Islam being the first religion as a flag bearer of women’s rights condemns objectification of women and guides the men to ensure that they do not indulge in objectification of women at any cost. They, women, should be loved and protected which will not only help the men in strengthening the institution of their family but will also prove helpful in earning God’s pleasure and blessings. The feudal and male dominant cultures exploit and violate women by extending them petty offerings thereby negating the principles of Islam.

It is observed that lack of education is playing an important role in objectification and exploitation of women. Those women were objectified and exploited who belonged to lower class and had little education. Importantly, men’s mentality is also identified in which women are considered as mere commodities - the commodities upon which one can claim ownership and can be sold to another person.

Conclusively, it is suggested that women’s economic independence, to some extent, is able to reverse the cyclic mechanism of sexual objectification. In order to make women achieve subjectivity, autonomy and agency, the societies in general have to stop looking at their bodies as their only capital and this process requires umpteen social awareness and effort. Academicians and religious scholars could be influencers in this cause. Thus, they may be facilitated in their awareness campaigns and trained on the cause to help stop objectification of women and build an integrated and peaceful society.



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