

Intersection of Gender and Religion: A Study of Sara Suleri's Meatless Days

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ABSTRACT: The intersection of gender and religion in a postcolonial society has been a significant area of interest for the feminist researchers, who raise their voices against the subjugation of women on the basis of biological differences. Sara Suleri in her notable memoir, *Meatless days* draws the condition of women in the context of the theistic military dictatorship of Pakistan. Her memoir explores the patriarchal society of Pakistan, where religion is used to circumscribe and exploit women. Even in the very first page of *Meatless Days*, Suleri says that Pakistan is not an easy breathing space for women and reduced them to a subdued community as they were not really a part of available vocabulary. Here, food also functions as a metaphor. Food plays a significant role in the context of identity politics in this postcolonial world and acts as a signifier of national culture. However, this memoir of Suleri embedded with social and political connotations. It, in a way records the memories of Suleri and her voice against female subjugation.

KEY WORDS: intersection of gender and religion, postcolonial society, subjugation, Sara Suleri, subdued community, signifier of national culture.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Sara Suleri Goodyear, a prominent South Asian feminist writer uses food in her memoir *Meatless days* to chart the national or larger history of Pakistan along with her personal memory where, she in a way, juxtaposes the genres of biography and fiction as her depiction is limited to self reflexive analysis and feeling as it also acts as a document of historical account. Suleri uses the genre of memoir to counter the impersonal and also uses traditional historiography in order to portray the national history of Pakistan. This memoir acts as an agency to recount and rewrite personal as well as national history. Here, she tries to collapse the boundaries between personal history and public events. Her memoir, *meatless days*, a collection of

short episodes interrogates the ideological construction of gendered nationhood. Moreover, she uses her memory and nostalgia in order to access the past.

In *Meatless Days*, Sara Suleri makes use of various female characters especially the character of grandmother, Dadi in the first chapter to portray the pathetic condition of women in Pakistan. Frustration of the female characters is evident throughout the memoir. They feel suppressed as well as suffocated. Suleri's mother always seemed lost and gives a same reply to her husband by saying "what an excellent thing" (2) in response to every question. Dadi found solace in food. Suleri's sister Ifat, was biting her lips as she was not able to express her feelings in this Pakistani patriarchal society. Even Sara's father, Mr. Suleri also has a dominative nature. Along with the description of family members, Suleri also draws the condition of Qayyum, the cook of their household. Here, Suleri by using the rhetorical constructive collective 'we' tries to depict the notion of sisterhood as she draws their collective feelings of being marginalized in Pakistan. Here, the idea of Pakistan, translated as 'the land of pure' was first considered and later realized in the name of Islam. Suleri unfolds the blend of religious fundamentalism with the state as the basic Islamic principles are integral part of the state as well as society. The 'two nation theory' was endangered by religion and it was the main cause for the emergence of the 'Muslim nationhood'. Islam as a religious ideology has been exploited by the political leaders of Pakistan and Suleri tries to highlight how women are marginalized in the name of religion. The version of Islam imposed upon the Pakistani society by General Zia based on the concept that the role of women in the social structure of the country was ineffective. At that time, women have to play only the biological roles as they were not permitted to celebrate their free and independent self. Calling them women does not

give them an identity therefore; Dadi never addressed women without first conferring the title of the lady. Even, she told her grandson not to call her granddaughters 'women'.

Suleri describes how Islam came out from homes and mosques and went into the streets of Pakistan. Suleri asserts, "I think we dimly knew we were about to witness Islam's departure from the land of Pakistan. The men would take it to the streets and make it vociferate, but the great romance between religion and populace, the embrace that endangered Pakistan, was done" (Suleri, 15). Religious groups and organizations were overpowered by General Zia-Ul-Haq. Laws such as 'Hundred Ordinance' were misused against women as they are punished for adultery even when they were the victims of rape. Suleri discusses all these religious manoeuvring of the nation in her memoir. It is worthy to note that Suleri's father, Mr. Suleri, who never showed any religious inclination at any point of his life, started to pray and Dadi, who had always attached to god suddenly stopped praying as Suleri said that dadi "forgot to pray". The metamorphoses of Mr. Suleri and Dadi symbolize that Islam, in Zia's time was not meant to be for women rather than it was men's possession. Here, Suleri openly expresses her disgust for General Zia for turning Pakistani people into some mere patriarchs and throughout her memoir she calls him not by his real name but, as General Zulu in order to satirize him.

Promod K. Nayar argues that women's literature from south Asia and Africa see themselves as situated at the intersection of three repressive discourses. Those are racism, imperialism and sexism and sexism at the hands of an oppressive patriarchy even in the native societies reduced them to machines of reproduction and labour. Suleri throughout her memoir calls her mother "mamma" not as Mair Jones or Suryaya Suleri as she neither Mair Jones nor Suryaya but, Mamma, representing her motherly roles and duties only. Suleri's mother's linguistic inability acts as an issue of marginalization in the society. Being a Welsh lady, it is difficult for her to communicate with her grandchildren in English because of their upbringing in Pakistan and excessive exposure to Urdu. Ultimately, she finds herself unconsciously adopting the role of a typical, subdued, less privileged by accepting her fate. Suleri has witnessed her mother's alienation and her failure to find her own self in a newly liberated nation. Moreover, Suler's sister also had to pay a heavy price for being a female patriarchal Pakistani society as she was disowned by Mr. Suleri for being strong and rebellious. In this context, Suleri

quotes, "Men lives in homes, and women live in bodies" (3). Meatless Days highlights Pakistani or third world women as a silenced community. Here, dominating males are those who use Islam, the god's word, to govern, monitor, silence, suppress and marginalize the female. Suleri explores how the (mis)use of religious discursive practices led to stereotyping of women which is in a way became a part of the social structure. By depicting all these, Suleri creates a nexus between religion and politics. On the very first page of Meatless Days, Suleri claims, "My reference is to a place where the concept of a woman was not really a part of available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant" (1)

Appadurai says in "How to make a National Cuisine" that national cuisine is constructed under contemporary conditions. Food also becomes a key cultural sign that structure social and individual identities along gender, class and religion. Unlike Gandhian philosophy, consuming meat was highly necessary to become a true Pakistani. Meat would nourish and sustain the subject. Here, the reader can contrast the scenario of vegetable eating Indian across the border. In this essay, Suleri discusses the importance of food in order to discipline their bodies, which acts as a symbol of national honour. Food becomes a site of both affirmation and resistance. It is a marker of ethnic difference for communities as it creates national and cultural spaces.

Suleri uses the trope of meat to interrogate and critique the ideas of muscular nationalism and also the condition of post-Bhutto and post-independent Pakistan. The reader can assume that Suleri tries to re-read the Nation Thing through the trope of food and her repressed trauma. She juxtaposes both the readable primary narrative and the unreadable text of the nation state. For example, in Dadi, the figure of the pre-modern is collapsed within the body of the modern. Displaced by partition and relocated by force, Dadi dismisses history, both personal and historical. She displays utter irreverence for names, numbers and dates. She does not remember the details of her repeated reproductive labour. She jumbled up Inglestan with England as if they were two different places. Dadi also forgot the number of siblings she had. She is only fixed on two realities of her life- food and God.

The figure of Dadi in a way dismisses the grand narrative of personal as well as national as she constructs her own style of nation thing. Belonging to nowhere, but the physical confines of

her home in Lahore, she re-maps the boundaries of her citizenship. Dadi gives importance on the purity of the ritual sacrifice during Eid festivities. In spite of the cultivated civility of her son and her daughter-in-law, Dadi goes out of her way to get a butcher as she retains her ability to serve a meal in the name of God. The reader can also compare the killing of the goat with the symbolic sacrifice of her sons since both were nourished by Dadi from the very beginning. Within the discourse of violence and sacrifice, meat becomes a metaphor for Dadi's empowerment over the family members. According to Suleri, Dadi not only challenges patriarchy but also history and time. Although she accidentally burns herself while doing kitchen work, her healing is faster than her young grandson, Irfan, who also suffers a ghastly burn from a kitchen accident. It is important to note that Dadi's grandchildren are never able to get any sense of historical events from her narrative. However, by the end of the chapter, Suleri replaces Dadi's character not as a 'molding centerpiece' but as a 'subject as other', who is able to push the boundaries of gender as well as harsh history of Pakistan.

In the second chapter of *Meatless days*, Suleri reveals the actual native of cultural identity and the ambiguity of origins. Here, she narrates how for the first time, after many years, she realizes that 'kapura' which she always thought of as sweetbreads were actually testicles. Here, the readers can map that how food is used in order to assert their Pakistaniness. Suleri describes that testicles were cooked with kidneys fed to the children. For example, girls are being taught to be submissive from the very young age by forcing them to eat kapura. Hence, it becomes a symbol of how masculinity was embedded in the Pakistani society. Suleri writes:

...we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance. Or else it was a hugely practical joke, we thought, hidden somewhere among our clothes. But formulating that definition is about as impossible as attempting to locate the luminous qualities of an Islamic landscape (2).

Furthermore, Suleri subverts the traditional model of measuring historical time by measuring narrative through the 'chronology of cooks'. General Yahya succeeds General Ayub and General Gha-Ui-Haq succeeds Bhutto and Suleri describes the passage by depicting the different cooks who worked within house. Here, Suleri satirizes the entire political condition of Pakistan by comparing the cook with dictator and kapura with the state. The story of kapura reminds Suleri

the story of Munni, Qayyum's daughter. The episode of Munni running around the house in pain with the pebbles falling out of her mouth gets juxtaposed with the episode of Sara hiding in their garden and her illicit chewing of raw cauliflowers. Qayyum, in order to convert Sara's taste cooks some kapura for her. Munni bites the stones covered in a mango leaf believing it to be 'pan' while Sara bites off the cauliflowers in her quest to know real and imaginary, believing raw can be eaten just as cooked. This action represents Munni as defenceless victim as Suleri depicts the master's power to fool the people from lower strata of society. Moreover, Sara's quest for knowledge was punished as children were forced to eat kapura to discipline them. Furthermore, the reader can also map the binaries of self/other, pure/impure, authentic/fake, insider/outsider, citizen/alien, subject/object and so on.

II. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, it is an attempt by a woman to look back upon her past and the past of a nation where, she mocks at the world where the notion of 3F (festivity, female and flesh) is highly ridiculed. It is impossible for Suleri to write her story from a singularly representational framework. Therefore, she goes beyond the nation in order to write about it. Being an upper class, privileged, educated young girl, Suleri depicts her role as a daughter, sister and also as a citizen. Moreover, Suleri also depicts the condition of third world woman here as she says that there are no women in the third world and they are in a way 'lost'.

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