
Un/Veiling and the Politics of Resistance in the Public Sphere: A Critical Study of Mumtaz Shah Nawaz *The Heart Divided*

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In this paper, I have analyzed *The Heart Divided* by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz through the postcolonial lens to trace the trajectory of the resistance of Muslim woman in the public sphere. The story revolves around three female characters Zohra, Sughra (the siblings) and a Hindu girl Mohni. The domestic space in Muslim household is divided into Zenana(the space specified for women) and Mardana (the space for men). Muslim women cannot cross this border line in the practice of daily life. And if ever, they go out, they have to veil their faces. My argument is that through the removal of the veil, Shah Nawaz explores the possibility of the participation of Muslim women in the public sphere. The trope of marriage serves as the site of contestation between the traditional Muslim patriarchal demands and the feminine desire to subvert it. Sughra, in the beginning of the novel, cherishes the ideals of a traditional Muslim woman who finds fulfillment through marriage. But the experience of a loveless marriage changes her views regarding the traditional gender roles in Muslim family structure. As an estranged wife, she finds refuge in the political struggle of the Muslim League. Zohra also refuses to accept the proposal of an arranged marriage. The veil is lifted both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Both the sisters are agreed to resist the patriarchal demands of conformity and decide to participate in the public sphere. Thus, the lifting of veil becomes symbolic of feminist resistance against patriarchal oppression which insists on confining women only to the private sphere of their lives.

The Heart Divided was published posthumously in 1957, almost after ten year of the creation of Pakistan. Hence it can be treated as a postcolonial text that looks at the genesis of the demand for Pakistan and also the social, political and cultural conditions that created maladjustments between the Hindus and the Muslims in every sphere of their lives. The novel is set in the backdrop of 1940, covering the span of seventeen year of the Muslim struggle against the oppressive colonial regime of the British on the one hand, and the Congress' insistence to be the sole

representative of the Indian people on the other. Lahore, the historical and cultural embodiment of Muslim identity serves as the locale. Sheikh Jamaluddin and his wife Mehrunissa, live at Nishat Manzal with their two daughters, Sughra and Zohra and their only son Habib. It is a traditional Muslim family where the women observe purdah (veil) and domestic space is further divided into Zenana (where the women of the family live) and Mardana (for men). The reader can find a structural similarity between the households depicted in *Twilight in Delhi* and *The Heart Divided*. In both the texts, the domestic spaces are divided in terms of gender i.e. Zenana (Women) and Mardana (Men). This division furthers the impression of the Muslim desire to marginalize women only to the private sphere of their lives. The women of the Sheikh family are strictly purdah (veil) observing but the mistress of the house is afraid of the “evil influence” of the Western life style. Mehrunissa, like Mir Nihal, disapproves of the colonial education and its social manners, especially the dresses, as these new-fangled ideas (Shahnawaz 3) are a threat to their peculiar ways of Muslim life. Observing Purdah or veiling one’s face thus becomes a mark of identity. And ignoring this dress code tantamount to violating the sanctity of the home and its Muslim traditions. Mehrunissa feels worried:

She was always afraid of her younger daughter in whom she could see the beginnings of those strange modern ways that had already entered some Muslim families. Besides, she did not quite approve of her friendship with Surraya whose family has cast off the veil and went to shops and restaurants with their faces uncovered. How shameless they were, and she thought, yet they belong to an old and respectable Muslim family. (2)

Sheikh Jamaluddin, on the other hand was an admirer of the West (3). He was the first man from his family to go abroad for higher education. So contrary to his wife, he is seemingly more liberal and enlightened. He does not oppose women education but believes in observing the Indian Muslim traditions regarding the role of women. In theoretical term, he can be taken as an ambivalent colonial subject who apes/ mimics some parts of the colonial discourse rejecting some which seem to be in direct conflict with his own cultural traditions. Hence, he likes to dine on table but does not allow his daughters to go without veil into the public sphere. As the novel progresses, there is a paradigm shift in his thinking. I see this ambivalence as a source of political and cultural strength for the colonized subject because it empowers him to enter into a dialogue with colonial power structure/ episteme and also preserve his/her imagined identity through certain cultural practices. Commenting upon the idea of ambivalence, Bill Ashcroft et al observe in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*:

Ambivalence describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized

subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. it is not disempowering for the colonial subject; but rather can be seen to be ambi-valent or “two- powered”. The effect of this ambivalence is to produce a profound disturbance of the authority of colonial discourse. (13)

Sheikh Nizamuddin, the head of the family disliked aping the West. He took pride in his family lineage that he traced back to Arab blood of his family (4). He himself was a great admirer of Oriental languages especially of Arabic and Persian with a degree of dislike for the English language. Nevertheless, he was conscious of the socio political changes taking around. He had realized that the Western education was a key to political survival in the contemporary world. For this purpose he had sent his son to England for higher studies in Law. My argument at this point is that in the family structure at Nishat Manzal, I see the emergence of modern Muslim identity in its nascent stage. Both the father and son are educated but there is also a degree of resistance towards mimicking the West. Moreover, the Muslim subject has moved one step ahead. Sheikh Nizamuddin can be taken as a fictional equivalent to Mir Nihal with a difference that Mir Nihal is poised against anything that smacks of Western influence including its education, dress and social manners. He has an orthodox commitment with his sense of indigeneity. But Sheikh Nizamuddin realizes that complete rejection of colonial discourse would result in political suicide. Hence his liking for western education. In theoretical terms, the Nishat Manzal is in process of appropriating the colonial discourse to construct an indigenous identity.

The concept of nationalism is debated in the text through Sughra, Zohra and Mohni. In the beginning, Sughra and Zohra, are confined to the private sphere of their lives. They are not allowed to go in the public sphere unveiled. Mohni, on the other hand, does not face any such restriction. Her house unlike Muslim domestic space is not divided into Zenana and Mardana. Hence she spends a more active life in political terms than her Muslim female counterparts. She takes an active part in the Salt Movement and becomes an ardent admirer of Gandhian nationalism.

Sughra and Zohra, on the other hand, have to struggle to enter into the mardana (domestic space for men) part of the house to challenge the patriarchal power structure. Hence they are twice removed from the public sphere. In the beginning Sughra, the eldest daughter seems less interested in participating the public sphere. She internalizes the image of traditional Muslim woman who remains loyal to the demands of the private sphere and does not make any attempt to change the power hierarchies by entering into the public sphere. Like her father, she is inspired by the images of Arab heroes/conquerors. As a favourite of her grandfather, she had heard many stories about the Muslim history beginning from the time of Caliphates. Thus, it is in her childhood memories that the images of her

Muslim identity are constructed. She felt thrilled when her grandfather had related the lives of Omar and Ali, and told her about the victories of Khalid, Tariq and Babar (Shah Nawaz 6). It is under the influence of these narratives that she defines her role to be confined to the private sphere of life. She feels proud of conforming to the demands of Muslim patriarchy. She imagines:

She would live up to her ideal life of Muslim womanhood. A dutiful daughter, a loving wife and devoted mother. That is what she wanted to be. Her men folk would go into the world to do deeds of valour and daring, and she would be there in the background to encourage and inspire. (7)

I argue that imagining a linear historical discourse without internal fissures and contradictions helps a subject in shaping his/her idea of national and cultural identity. Since *The Heart Divided* happens to be a postcolonial text, hence I interpret the act of creating/ imagining a linear history as a conscious effort to create Pakistani identity. In this context, Bodh Parkash in *Writing Partition: Aesthetics and Ideology in Hindi and Urdu Literature* observes:

The new generations of Pakistani modernist Urdu writers attempted to create a distinct Pakistani identity. It involved the construction of a continuous Islamic history that somehow reduced the centrality of the shared centuries of Hindu Muslim co-existence. In *The Heart Divided* Mumtaz Shah Nawaz does it by foregrounding an essentialist Islam that could flow seamlessly into feminist and egalitarian discourses. (171)

Both Sughra and Zohra believe in this essentialist Islamic identity with a difference that Zohra takes the lead in challenging the Muslim patriarchal demands which tend to limit women only to the private sphere of their lives. Commenting upon the essentialist perspective of one's identity, Satya P. Mohanty argues:

The essentialist view would be that the identity common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging; since it is based on the experience they share. Opponents of essentialism often find this view seriously misleading, since it ignores historical changes and glosses over internal differences within a group by privileging only the experience that are common to everyone. (30)

In this context, both Sughra and Zohra take an essentialist position regarding the notion of their cultural and religious identity. Zohra though takes the lead in challenging Muslim patriarchal order. Through her elder brother Habib, she asks for her father's permission to participate in inter university declamation contest in

which men's colleges will also be competing. The permission is not granted. Sheikh Jamaluddin says, "You don't understand the difficulties, my son. We are Muslims and our community is very conservative." (69). Sughra, on the other hand, has no plans to challenge these traditions. She agrees to marry her cousin chosen by her parents. Thus, in Sughra and Zohra, we see the dialectics of modernity and tradition contesting each other. Both the sisters represent the discourse of Muslim identity which in the beginning is also fraught with contradictions. Sughra believes in the narratives of Muslim gender politics that envisages women confined to private space. Zohra contests this position by insisting on redefining these roles. Cara N. Cilano observes:

Still in purdah, Sughra represents a more traditional definition of Muslim womanhood in the early 1930s. Zohra on the other hand awakens. She chafes at certain traditions, especially purdah, during the same period as Sughra commits herself to the dominant ideal of Muslim womanhood. (29)

Within the essentialist discourse of Muslim identity, Shah Nawaz portrays the two sisters as representatives of two different theoretical positions regarding the Muslim gender politics and afterwards the nationalist politics. In the fictional trajectory of Muslim identity, both the sisters seem to reject Mir Nihal's idea of a monolithic discourse of identity. In the early part of the novel, they seem to contest each other in both the public and private spheres of their lives. Zohra refuses to marry a man she does not love. And before entering into national politics, she takes a subject position (Cilano 29) by challenging the social restrictions imposed upon her in the name of family traditions. Sughra remains loyal to her willing marginality until she feels disillusioned with her marriage. The death of her son forces her to revisit her stated position about the role of Muslim women in society.

Sughra decides to join the Muslim League headed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah to take an active part in the public sphere. She realizes that her marriage cannot be resurrected. And the participation in the public sphere can provide her the necessary relief from a loveless marriage. She joins the Muslim League. And it is during this political struggle she discovers how the Muslim women are manipulated to remain confined to the domestic space in the name of religion and tradition. She feels sad how the religion was being interpreted to suit the demands of indigenous patriarchal order. By and large, Muslim female subject was denied to give her opinion regarding the matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance. It is interesting to note that Sughra's disillusionment with her marriage opens up the possibility of re/imagining her sexuality. In the Muslim League she feels attracted to Kamal, a fellow political worker. She feels torn between her desires to remain faithful to her estranged husband and resist her love for Kamal. When he kisses her for the first time, she has mixed feelings. She does not feel any remorse or guilt (375). Kamal proposes her. She refuses to be the second wife of Kamal. In her

refusal to the marriage proposal, we see the emergence of a female subject who is ready to take control of her life. She refuses to be swept away by emotions. She makes a conscious choice of continuing with the political struggle believing in the possibility of a meaningful socio political change. In her imagined brave new world, Muslim women will not be marginalized only to the private sphere of their lives. Another metaphorical veil has been removed. The stereotypical emotional and scared female Muslim subject articulates her desire to build a new world based on equality, dignity and freedom promised to both the genders. She rejects the marriage proposal:

Not men of our generation, Kamal. Besides, it does not, it cannot, lead to happiness you know that. We are trying to build a new world on sure foundations, and if we cannot lead our own lives according to our principles, can we ever do anything? (383)

In the quoted text, we see the emergence of feminine desire to be at the subject position in her life. Thus, the national freedom struggle in the public sphere opens up the possibility of hitherto defined gender roles in the private space of Muslim families. Sughra has learnt her lesson. Through a loveless marriage, she discovers that freedom from hitherto canonized notions of gender roles is the only possible way that leads to happiness. For Muslim female subject, freedom from the colonizer is fruitless unless it is freedom from the gender hierarchies in the family life. It is interesting to note here that in the beginning of the story, Sughra was vocal in favour of gender hierarchies. She celebrated the idea of “ideal wife” who remains divorced from the demands of political struggle in the public sphere. But through a personal tragedy, she discovers that her ideas about ideal Muslim female were essentially flawed. They need revision. And then she discovers “her new principles” which motivate her to work for re/defining her role both in the private and public spheres of her life. The fictional revision of political roles finds an interesting parallel in the person of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. In the early stages of his political career, he was given the title of “The Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity”. But afterwards, he got disillusioned with his own political ideals. In metaphorical terms the veil got lifted from his eyes. He revisited the idea of the possibility of reaching a constitutional arrangement that could satisfy both the communities in the British India. Thus Shah Nawaz, through the trope of family, explores the idea of politics of resistance and national identity in colonial India.

Shah Nawaz further explores the theme of re/defining gender roles through the conflict between older and younger generation. As discussed in the beginning, the mother of Zohra and Sughra feels perturbed over her daughter’s reaction towards the institution of marriage. The mother wants her daughters to surrender their subject position in the name of respect for tradition. The daughters view tradition as a mode of oppression designed to deny their human rights. Thus the oppression is perpetuated through the same gender. The mother becomes an

oppressor without the consciousness of an oppressor. In *The Second Sex* Simon de Beauvoir theorizes the social conditioning of girl child in the name of traditional gender roles. She argues:

The girl child is often concerned in this way with motherly tasks; whether for convenience or because of hostility and sadism, the mother thus rids herself of many of her functions; the girl in this matter made to fit precociously into the universe of curious affairs; her sense of importance will help her assuming her femininity. (56)

The theoretical underpinnings are applicable to Muslim mother in the text, who considers her daughters as rebels because they have challenged the canonized notions of marriage and motherhood. She cannot reconcile with the idea that there is any other possible way of imagining female existence outside the institution of marriage. When Zohra refuses to take marriage as the *bête noire* of feminine life, her mother feels surprised “You talk as if all of us, who have married and have happy homes, are a burden on others! A woman’s place is in the home and would be proud of you if you were a good wife and a devoted mother” (316). Zohra and Sughra rebel against this stereotypical image of an ideal Muslim woman who finds marriage as the final destination of her social existence.

Conclusion:

In this paper I have argued that both Sughra and Zohra represent the modern Muslim woman during colonial era. Their lives are defined by the religiously negotiated patriarchal cultural values. As compared to their Hindu counterpart, Mohni, they are doubly marginalized in their private lives. As the first sign of resistance, they have to challenge the Zenana and Mardana division of the private space. And then the journey towards the participation in the public sphere begins. Both the sisters challenge the Muslim patriarchal structures by insisting on participating in the public sphere: Sughra through rejecting her husband and Zohra on insisting to marry a man of her choice. And they participate in the public sphere through taking their veil off. Thus the politics of un/veiling becomes representative of the modern Muslim woman’s desire to participate in the public sphere of life thereby rejecting the traditional role of “the ideal Muslim woman”, only confined to the private sphere.

Primary Text:

Shah Nawaz, Mumtaz. *The Heart Divided*. Lahore: ASR Publications, 1990. Print.

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