

## GENDER VULNERABILITY IN FAROOQI'S NOVEL, *THE STORY OF A WIDOW*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper will investigate the subtle and sensitive questioning of Women's condition in Pakistan in Farooqi's novel, The Story of a Widow. Farooqi's title is misleading and leads one to think that this book too will portray the subjugated position of women in a patriarchal society but on closer investigation it is seen that Farooqi points towards the hindering and cowardly mindset of women in giving and supporting independence to their own kind. The portrait of the dead husband symbolizes the patriarchal presence. It is important to see that the judgmental attitude of the man is perceived by the wife even when he is no more. This is indicative of how powerfully the society is entrenched in the myth that man is wiser and more capable than the woman and therefore must remain in the driving seat. Despite the complete physical absence of Akbar Ali, Mona's deceased husband, he continues to figure prominently in her thoughts. What is worth appreciating is the resilience of Mona with which she continues to defy and rise above the looks of rebuke and chastisement that Akbar Ali's portrait continues to impart. After widowhood, Mona gains money as well as the liberty to make her own decisions yet she is, throughout the novel, cowed down by her sister and her daughters, relations that one would otherwise expect to be supportive and understanding. Through the struggle of Mona, Farooqi highlights the importance of self-growth and self – autonomy which can only be obtained by making ones own decisions, shouldering the burden of error, living through agony and finally coming out not triumphant but stronger and wiser i.e like the men.*

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Vulnerability, Self-growth, sensitivity, liberal, reformation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Musharraf Ali Farooqi is an acclaimed novelist of Pakistan. Born in 1968 in Hyderabad, Pakistan, he was among the five writers shortlisted for Asia's most prestigious literary prize in 2012. His acclaimed translation of *Dastane Amir Hamza*, a magical fantasy epic, was published in October 2007. This paper aims to study Farooqi's novel, *The story of a Widow*. The focus of this study is the inequality in gender expectations in Pakistani society. The omniscient narrator explores the complex web of expectations from a woman in various capacities not only by men but also from women. The different image, duties and expectations in every relation that women are expected to fulfill are not only complex but very demanding. The novel delineates the lack of a literal as well as figural space for women even in so called educated, liberal thinking and socio-economically well placed groups. Woolf had observed years ago that a woman needs money and a room of one's own to be able to fulfil her potential. Farooqi argues that both these aspects are not sufficient to give *women* the right to decision making even in their own life. Given that we are in the era of the third phase of women Movement, the scenario for female independence is still far from the ideal. The acquisition of education, a fair share in jobs, even legal rights to inheritance still leave women in the clutches of a retrogressive and dominant mind set which adheres to backward concepts of patriarchal control making them weak, dependent and leaving them in precarious positions. In *The Story of a Widow*, the

trappings of home, offspring's and even sufficient money give Mona no room to develop. Farooqi shows a stereotypical marriage where a wife is bound to home and is a provider of comfort rather than a friend and companion. In this case, the husband is a good provider and his household expectations are met but there are many question marks about the fulfilment of the woman. Farooqi shows how a woman's sole task seems to be running the household smoothly and efficiently. He shows how the lack of communication and empathy by men makes a relationship sterile. While some traditions were followed without complaint by the women of the previous generation, greater sensitivity to the rights of women in the present times leads to greater resentment and smouldering wrath when constraints are felt in the attaining of satisfaction and independence by women. This is not to say that creation of awareness of female rights is negative in the social scene but to emphasize upon the need for further fairplay and sensitivity between gender roles and gender expectations.

Woolf in her critical essay, *A Room of One's Own* provides a historic and critical account of male opinion on the subject of female desire for independence. To briefly sum up men's opinion is to say that generally speaking women were considered inferior intellectually, while this judgement is passed on, no survey of their conditions is kept in mind. She says and rightly so that the best of men if trapped to household chores and a discouraging academic educational environment would fail to shine in their respective fields.

Women have figured prominently in the poetry of men, they have been their cup of hemlock, their muse and their light beckoning them to shores of unimaginable bliss, Is a man so deeply flawed in his mind that he would die for someone who is degraded as a being of inferior intellect. What does it say of men? Heroic, splendid, sordid, grossly insane, bizarre, mean and stupid women have dominated in literature in every genre, be it tragedy, satire, comedy or romantic comedy no writer could jump off the creative springs without women as their subject. The most dynamic minds fantasized about woman but in real life the women suffered from gross injustices and harsh limitations. Though we have travelled far in the attainment of rights for women the ideal is yet far. In today's world we should not be speaking so much for women's rights: our aim should be a commitment to the survival and wholeness of the entire people: male and female. When women rights are trampled, the happiness and wholeness of the male is compromised, too. Unhappy and unloved women cannot impart love or happiness. Alice walker talks about the plight of women and says that they are required to bake biscuits for lazy tramps even when their souls cry out to paint watercolors of sunsets or the rain falling on the green pasturelands and their body is broken and forced to bear children. Walker believed that women are rich repertoire of spirituality and all this is going to waste as the basis of art is spirituality. She points out how oppression in women tends to so often go unnoticed and unheard. In the essay, *Patriarchal Dividend*, R.W. Connell says, "All social structures are uneven and contradictory.....The hierarchy of masculinities is not a geometrical theorem; it is an empirical fact." He believes that hegemony in gender is a process, a historical relationship and not a fixed pattern. If it is open to historical change then the present man is expected to become more open, more malleable to democratic norms. The pressure for conformity comes from families, peer groups and even social media. Often the male members internalize the social norms and adopt masculine thought and behaviour at the cost of repressing their feelings. This thought pattern is injected in the male members by the females who raise them. Thus the role of women remains tantamount to the reformation in the historical control exercised by men.

In *The Story of a Widow*, Farooqi shows the monotonous and dull life of Mona. Since marriage, her only occupation had been for years to cater to the needs of her family. As Akbar Ahmad spent more and more time in office and sometimes worked from home, Mona remained busy in providing food and tea to his colleagues. We never get to hear of their conversations and bonding other than the comforts which were ritually provided by the wife to her husband. From her reflections we gather that she lost all interest in life after she had her second child. Her period of depression was noticed only by her sister who helped her but her husband remained oblivious to her need for company, for care, and desire for attention. Even during this depression she continued to perform the tasks expected of her. Akbar Ahmad was used to being looked after. His toothpicks, his hand towels, three minutes seeped tea leaves were rituals for which he made no allowance for failure or forgetfulness. If at any time, Mona left them to the care of the household help and something went wrong, Akbar Ahmad complained for days on end so that Mona was always pressurized and never at ease. It took her months after the death of her husband to even begin to enjoy any activity like becoming engrossed in a book or taking a prolonged walk without the fear of completing her tasks. There came a variance in her life which would not have been possible with a husband who strictly followed a regimented routine. Farooqi describes the extent of patriarchal control in subtle ways for instance even after her husband's death and becoming heir to a considerable amount of money Mona could not spend on impulse. On rare occasions, when she did she thought her husband's portrait on the wall was giving her reproachful looks. Her planned and regimented life was thoroughly challenged when she met Salamat Ali who seemed a contrast to her previous husband in every way. All her dormant wishes and desires came to the forefront as she found a man who was openly admiring. His reckless spending, lavish attentions, fulfilment of her desires like buying a car for her, spontaneous and unabashed plans like taking her to the beach, completely unnerved her. Her deprivation of personal praise was so deep that for a time she revelled in his compliments. Mona who was a mother of two daughters had never been appreciated and acknowledged neither by her previous husband nor by her daughters. She found a joy in the company of her present husband who loved her for her own sake or so she felt. She became brave enough to defy the norms of conventional expectations.

It was sad when she found that even her daughters for whom she had done so much were extremely reluctant to give a chance of happiness to their mother. Mona remembered mournfully how she had paved the way for Amber, her daughter, to get married to the person she chose while the father had opposed her choice. She remembered the patience and resilience with which she convinced her husband and secured happiness for her daughter. Now the same daughters were up in arms against their mother marrying a second time. Mona realized the selfish requirements of everyone who wanted her time and attention and wished to see her only in the conventional image of the mother who had no other need or object of love than the family. Mona felt betrayed by the very people from whom she was expecting support. Farooqi, here, questions the moral judgement on social taboos.

Sacrifice and an effacement of the self are always expected of the mother. Once a mother, she ceases to be an individual in her own right. Even when the daughters know that their mother is alone and might be happier with company, they refuse to think of it; instead they are more concerned with societal reactions, especially the effect on their own marriages. They cannot bear the satirical remarks of their in-laws. Farooqi draws our attention to the selfishness inherent in every relation. While a mother's love is unconditional, definite conditions are attached to the love of children for the parents.

Mona's act of defying society unsettles all around her but what unsettles the reader is that Salamat Ali proves the suspicious society to be correct. While Salamat Ali is an engaging character in the beginning of the plot by the end he becomes irresponsible and uncaring. He had shown those streaks earlier but Mona gave the benefit of doubt as she was fairly enchanted by him. What then is Farooqi trying to tell us? Is society right in stopping elderly women to marry again? The question arises that if it is not against the tenants of religion why can a woman not have the right to find a second husband? In such a scenario why do women lose all support of her family? Mona marries without the tacit agreement of her family when things go wrong the society stands triumphant. We wonder if part of the problem is because Mona is too trained in moral and financial discipline to accept any transgression or that she is too afraid of going any further in the relationship due to societal rejection. It seems that she fears ouster from her family nest. Hina her sister is overprotective to the point of usurping her independence. Farooqi leaves us with the question that constraints in the path of freedom may assume different garbs. The interpretation of Farooqi's text is not simplistic. Its complexity lies in the fact that there are no easy answers. Life takes unexpected turns but what is important is the ability and the enabling environment where women can make their decisions, accept and face the consequences of their decisions and begin again, just like men.

The fact that Mona comes out of a difficult and embarrassing situation, unscathed and stronger than before, is testimony to the resilient power of women. The ending, I believe is symbolic. She is taking driving lessons, literally in the driving seat, adding another dimension to her sense of independence. The society in the last page crystallizes in the person of Mrs. Kazi who "was always a prisoner to her son's availability" but who also began to take driving lessons not to be independent but only to spite Mona. Mona's decreased dependence on her daughters is also an indication of how Farooqi believes and promotes self-reliance and self-worth. Dependency is a form of enslavement and Mona's continued struggle to gain autonomy and build her self-esteem is that positive aspect which Farooqi attempts to highlight. Mona's observation of her husband's portrait without being agonized by his look or his memories is another step in her progression as a liberated self. Her transformation from someone who was always looking for approval from husband and daughters to a woman who, ".....had become accustomed to making her decisions to suit her own priorities" (p247) is a journey towards light, reason, strength and maturity. She realized that "moments of loneliness were a small price to pay" for a liberated self.

In *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, Deniz Kandiyoti says that women choose to accommodate and uphold patriarchal norms, accepting gender roles that disadvantage women overall maximizing their own power and options. They feel robbed of power and respectability. This is why women often resist the process of transition because the old system seems to be slipping away without any empowering alternative. Therefore when classic patriarchy is in some sort of a crisis women often pressurize men to live up to their obligations and to not step out of line. "Their passive resistance takes the form of claiming their half of this particular patriarchal bargain—protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety. This is seen in Farooqi's novel, when both the daughters of Mona and her sister resist the change in their mother's situation and propagate the importance of adhering to existing societal norms. Their view is strengthened by their spouses. This is a classic example of what Kandiyoti perceives in his essay. He says, "Systemetic analyses of women's strategies and coping mechanisms can help to capture the nature of patriarchal systems in their cultural, class-specific and temporal concreteness and reveal how men and women resist, accommodate, adapt and conflict with each other over resources, rights and responsibilities." (Kandiyoti,pp285) Kandiyoti talks of how these

patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. Patriarchal bargains according to him are not timeless but are open to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders. It has been noted in research studies that when a woman is deprived of socio-economic power she is not averse to deserting her husband. The cyclical nature of domestic power and the anticipation of inheriting authority encourage women to thoroughly internalize patriarchal forms. Subordination to men is offset by the control women attain over women. Ironically, women trying to resist patriarchal control become participants with vested interest in the system that oppresses them. When men exercise economic protection of women, classic patriarchy keeps its domain thus women often resist the process of transition because "they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternative." (Kandiyoti, P282). Women do not want to step out of line or lose their respectability which is tied to following the norms. The daughters of Mona prefer the protection of their husbands in exchange for submissiveness and their mother's happiness.

Kate Heddleston says in her essay, *Social Norms and Gendered Expectations*, "Social norm violations can affect more than just the perception of credibility. Norm violations can actually illicit punitive behaviour from the people around you. When faced with a violation of a social or gender norm, people will exert something called 'social control' in an attempt to realign the situation with their own expectations of behaviour."

Mona's sister Hina and both the daughters of Mona assume the position of being wiser and more protective towards Mona. This greatly irks Mona and she often dislikes Hina's needless interruption in her affairs especially Hina's officious and forceful manner in the way she introduces Immad to Mona. Farooqi shows how the society of women subtly connives to limit the autonomy of a single woman. It is important to note that Farooqi shows a sensible and strong woman who is suddenly seen as dependent and vulnerable as soon as her husband is no more. Farooqi builds a strong case where we sympathize with Mona's desire for greater control of her life and the awareness of increased responsibility. Despite her second marriage she is not ready to stop being a good mother to her daughters.

The unconscious gendered subjectivity and the disabling environment does not allow Mona the freedom to exercise her wishes. She is able to negotiate and strategize to some extent but she is never completely free of guilt or remorse. It is only in situations that every order reveals its contradictions. This study looks into how Farooqi explodes the myth of sisterhood that is prevalent in radical feminism. He engages in critical and reactive strategy of anti-sexism while developing new paradigms and norms for understanding and speaks against the tradition bound system which denies happiness and growth to women by retrogressive adherence to patriarchal norms by women, themselves.

The socio-economic change upon marriage and divorce on household formation leads to the questioning of assumptions in man woman relations. Complex personal struggle opens doors to the formation of new strategies and forms of consciousness. We must strive as does Farooqi to eliminate the distress caused by insensitive remarks, tone and expectations and to listen to people rather than talk to them. In this novel, Farooqi leads us to a better understanding of class and gender bound restrictions which need to be redressed and looked into with clear-headed objectivity.

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