



FEATHER LIGHTNESS: THE REALITY OF AN INDIAN WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

This article is a partial attempt to critically analyse the position of an Indian woman in the eyes of her own parents, family and society. A woman, who as a girl is hurriedly married off at an early age, used by her in-laws for selfish interests and tossed by the outer world as an unprotected light weight object. Adversity is the situation when disguise falls and the real face is exposed. In the same way, a woman who always places her partner and other dear ones at elevated altars often gets the jolt of her life when any accident or need puts her family and society at fire-test. Here most of them fail to pay her for her true services or to give her due respect which she deserves from this planet of human beings and the taboos.

Keywords: Insecurity, Fair-sex, Scuttle, Dowry, Substratum.

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INTRODUCTION

Seldom or never a woman in India is found to be exclaiming happily that she is totally satisfied in all spheres of her life – social, professional or marital life. Somewhere in the depth of these cobwebs, she is a terrible victim of 'insecurity'. Harassment at workplace, eve-teasing, stalking and attempt rapes are some of the strategies which satisfy the male-ego and their self-created revenge resulting from the jealousy towards females who are earning for themselves and are not at their mercy.

The other side of this coin is even more baffling as the working females sound more accessible to the males because they think that such women are already unwanted by their respective partners or kicked out of their own houses with no men around to protect them. Such women are also thought of as wives to handicapped men or the drunkards who feed on their salaries like parasites and honour them with abuses and beatings in return. Let alone the sweeper or housemaid, even

the deserving females workers in any reputed institute or sector are looked down upon by their male colleagues. Obviously, these male fellow-workers, in spite of their own equal or secondary status at workplace, muse about their fairer-sex workmates as downtrodden workers in their own respective homes, dependent on their husbands for every major or minor decision, waiting upon the dinner or upon their husbands to take off the clothes, socks or shoes to be cleaned, serving hot food while themselves having it cold, following the orders of their husbands religiously and never questioning them once having handed over their own salaries to them. The limit is when any of the male workers mocks his hard working female boss in disgusting words such as, 'Look, here she snaps at others like an anaconda but once back at home with her husband, during night, she is just a . . .' It is quite a relief for them that the one, who towers above her head, at the end of the day, is, after all, a male! Though, this is true in 99% cases, yet the statement

only satisfies the suppressed revengeful spirits of men. This slave-like, not a subordinate position, but a no-position status of a woman in her life, is what fancied by the men.

Sometimes, at workplace, a stern, bold, confident or beautiful colleague becomes a challenge for the male workmates. Instead of respecting her talent and appreciating the cosiness of office atmosphere as a result of her 'beautiful and bountiful' presence, they try to show her 'her real worth' by trying to ravish her modesty.

This is quite natural in a society where a boy grows up seeing his grandparents showering his mother with curses for begetting a girl child, his sister, in the family; humiliating his mother for not bringing eye-squinting amount of dowry, instructing their son not to treat her lovingly and reprimand her even for no-faults. Such a boy who is always loved and cuddled by his grandparents only because he is a male child while his own sister shooed away for being a girl, is sent to better schools and provided with more pocket money while his sister is sent to cheap schools and never financially pampered like himself; no doubt such a boy would grow up thinking about a female as a mere organism to be pelted with stones or to be kicked; a creature too burdensome that nobody accepts her as a partner without hoards of gifts and money and thereby the hateful concept of dowry. A boy who has seen his own father involved in extra marital affairs but when the concerned argument crops up in the house, the father, accused of adultery, instead, beats the mother brutally till she falls down and attacks her ravenously for sex. All such disgusting incidents drive a growing male-child to think about female gender as 'unwanted', 'despised', 'a creature with lots of duties and no rights', 'no stable place in the society, 'the kicked ones' and so on. Moreover, in the midst of such an atmosphere, if these boys spot girls of their own age studying with them in expensive colleges, going for dynamic vocational courses, ending up as talented and independent professionals and claiming as much respect as their male counterparts, then no doubt, it is very likely to rouse their egoist spirit to revengeful or lustful attempts out of jealousy and humiliation.

It is this envious feeling and self-created sense of insult that result in attempted rape or murder, mental or physical assault, aggressive behaviour, frustration, conspiracy or any controversy among the working team against the female colleagues.

Back at home the situation is no less demeaning as the professional-cum-housewife has to be answerable for each and every teasing activity on the part of the tramps, scoundrels or even colleagues. A working lady, in our society, exhibits signs of uncertainty at the level of protection and coordination that she expects from her family members who are also sharing her salary. Most of these times, a wife has to feel guilty before her doubtful husband only because she went as far as being frank with him and having related to him an episode of eve-teasing or office harassment. On the other hand, the husband who would gradually begin to detest her chastity does never guarantee of claiming such a scale of purity himself but only expects it from his wife.

These hideous truths of our society have tormented many homes and shattered many families. So much so, that both Indian male and female writers seldom hesitate to carry out such themes in their writings. Their main concern is not to humiliate or objectify the fairer-sex but at times they need to depict the woman as a 'rootless plant' which can be shaken by whiffs of wind coming from any direction. After much contemplation, these writers are successful in deducing the reasons of accusing the women for flaws that are not theirs. One of the reasons is that the society muses over the fanciful fact that it 'owns' the woman; it fails to impart her feelings of belongingness towards her own society, house and family.

Bano's Sitara Belongs to No-where:

Jeelani Bano (1936) is an accomplished Urdu writer who has excelled in writing novels, novelettes and short stories. She is widely known for her short stories where her main concern is to depict the delicacy of a woman's senses. Moreover, she places the perplexed female against a boastful and secure male to intensify the projection of injustice being done.

Bano's collection of short stories, *The Alien Home and Other Stories*, translated by Zakhia Mashhadi, brings out a stark reality of the real worth of a person in his own home and society. One of the stories in the collection, *The Enlightenment*, laments the tragedy of a working lady who comes to know about her own worth in her own family when the mask falls and the inner reality dawns upon her. Bano's protagonist, Sitara, is a beautiful working lady driven to work, at her husband's 'silent' suggestion, in an office, at two thousand rupees per month. One of her male colleagues, Adil, lusts for her physical beauty and tries to throw himself upon her forcibly. He hides in the toilet and when Sitara locks the door to use the toilet, he pawns upon her 'and in the scuffle that follows, her sari (long cloth wrapped over the body) goes into the dirty water of toilet bowl'.

(*The Enlightenment*, 70)

No reader can leave the concept of Jeelani Bano unappreciated when, right in the opening of the story, she compares the toilet-fight between Sitara and Adil with a cricket match where the audience is holding its breath and the player, in an attempt to catch the ball, misses it by a fraction of a second:

The player made a dash for the ball but missed it. . .the player again sprinted menacingly towards the ball but could barely touch it. The ball bounced and fell some distance away. . .Sitara, like a ball would escape the strong grip of the player, rolling, stumbling, running in search of some safe heaven. . .

(*The Enlightenment*, 70)

Sitara is terribly amazed at the attitude of the people back at home who are succulently enjoying her story but nobody comes forward to pacify her for the trauma she has undergone or even appreciate her efforts for saving her own honour. Initially, she was feeling proud of her struggle which ended with the rushing of the office workers into the toilet after hearing her screams; in the meanwhile Adil's filthy character was exposed and Sitara escaped his clutches with an injury on her arm caused by a broken bangle. Bringing Adil's character into light was no less than an achievement. It was

obvious that Adil would lose his job and be taken to jail. Sitara felt herself on the seventh sky 'feeling she had set the demon Ravana afire and burnt him for good'.

(*The Enlightenment*, 70)

Noticing that the people at home were not interested in extending moral support, she waits for her husband, Khalid, to appear. As soon as she sees him, she runs and clings to him, trying to hide herself in safest arms that a society and life can offer to a woman. In her attempt to do so, she does not fail to behold that her husband tucks a letter in his pocket. It is clear from Khalid's annoyance as if some intruder has barged into his privacy; her husband's sweet concentration is now divided between his wife's distorted situation and his ex-girlfriend, Rizwana who is now staying in Canada and frequently sends him fragrant letters with a Canadian stamp. Even when Sitara is hugging her husband, she can feel the love letter between them and its juicy contents which are trying to tear her husband away from her. His irritation and unconcerned attitude prove that she has dishevelled him from his reverie. Khalid, since before his marriage with Sitara, was involved in an affair with Rizwana who turned unfaithful and broke his heart. As a result, he became short-tempered, suspicious, apathetic and lamenting his misfortunes. It was Sitara, who at such a hard time, entered into his life, held his hand and healed him with her patience and love. The daughter of somewhat a richer family, Sitara had to adjust with her in-laws in a small house, devoid of all comforts. Her husband's silent encouragement drove her to go out for a job. It was she, who all these years, bore the humiliation of not stepping as a Lakshmi (Goddess of money) because she did not bring with her a lot of dowry, gifted the family a baby, managed perfectly between household chores and the office work, tolerated her mother-in-law's egoist words and listened patiently to Khalid's shouting and in the evening, forgetting every bitterness, brought basketful of fruits and vegetables for the family, not even boasting that she is contributing to the household expenditure.

Now, that very Sitara is feeling Rizwana's letter with all its thickness in Khalid's pocket. Yes, Rizwana, the ever fresh topic, about whom, at times,

Khalid talks very casually, cunningly, lovingly and shamelessly. She is on the verge of feeling guilty as to why she opened her heart to her own husband and family. Here, with the progress of every word in her story, Khalid is becoming more and more suspicious about her purity. And why not! After all, her purity is the badge that he and his family wear even if it costs her, her own life. Surely, he would not tolerate any stain on his own honour. As far as the injury on her arm is concerned, Khalid remains indifferent. Jerking her hand aside and putting Rizwana's letter carefully in his pocket, Khalid swears at Adil. What matters to him, is his family's dignity which should be saved, come what bruises or gashes Sitara gets on her arm. With these very arms Sitara has been serving the family and toiling for its welfare. She is not able to accept that anything hurts or hits her, does not move her family. Instead, everybody inside the house is afraid of what Adil's statement would be in front of the police while in the neighbourhood everyone is anxiously waiting for the upcoming reports of the police.

What adds more to her grief is the pessimistic attitude of her father who arrives with Sitara's mother as soon as they get the news. His nature of thinking seems very calm and understanding but his instant resignation withdrawal leaves his daughter almost shocked. Her own father is asking her to retreat instead of encouraging her to face the adversity with daring attitude. He simply desired the matter to be hushed down under the whim of fear, disgrace and future apprehensions:

I think we should take case back from the police. . .what is the use of publishing such matters. . .He will not get any punishment. . .in this society of ours what you call a crime is a mere prank for a man. He will present a thousand evidences to prove himself innocent.

(The Enlightenment, 74-75)

Somewhere we feel the thoughtful practicality of an old man who is fathering a daughter, thinking about the questions that would be raised on his daughter's chastity, publicly. When, during conversation, he lowers his head in anticipated shame and defeat, he is representing the stoically coward side of the

Indian society. His appearance looks as if bearing a daughter is itself part of shame; as if Sitara's molestation is a plaque of punishment for his previous ill-deeds. Sitara never expected that her sturdy and rich father, who brought her up with virtues like self-respect and courage, could stand so weak and dejected some day. On the other hand, her father-in-law's rebukes and the way he turns his face away from her as if she is as dirty as the toilet bowl itself. Her mother-in-law also does not fail to fan the fires when she declares that her daughter-in-law has lost her honour for mere two thousand rupees. According to her, the family has gained nothing except 'face blackened with dishonour'.

(The Enlightenment, 73)

As far as the world outside her home is concerned, her colleagues appreciate her husband's grandeur and admire his pure love for her. According to them she should be grateful to Khalid that he has not asked her for a divorce. On the other hand, Adil's wife is little upset, trying to hold them, (Sitara and Adil) equally responsible for the scandle. She thinks that Sitara managed to escape without a stain on her dignity while 'poor Adil' is held back as an uncensored accused. His wife's gesture shows that, unlike Khalid, she is trying her level best to veil Adil's filth.

Amid all this turbidity, the only elderly person who shares her tears is her mother. Her mother hugs her affectionately and accuses the world indirectly of punishing women for no sins committed. She well imagines the horror that her daughter has gone through and she values and admires every drop of sweat that Sitara shed during her struggle. The other person is Sitara's own daughter who is worried about her injured arm more than Adil, people and society. In this way, Sitara's supporters are only two people – one who bore her and the other one whom she herself bore – her mother and her daughter – both females. Therefore, this female genetic chain declared its sensitivity as well as unity, silently.

Sitara has the strength of over-stepping everybody's opinion but with Khalid, the case is different. She becomes more and more nervous with each passing moment and gradually loses her confidence. After soiling the day between office and

police station, when Khalid comes to bed, Sitara hugs him in search of an emotional substratum but he pushes her away and brushes her arms aside. His action depresses her even more. He is of the opinion that her more-than-friendly dealings had emboldened Adil and tempted him to cross his limits. Khalid expects that Adil's side in court would be stronger than theirs and he will escape the punishment easily. Khalid thinks loudly and his monologues send Sitara in spasms of depression repeatedly until she breaks down and laments that 'Adil robbed her of everything'. In a reflex, Khalid repeats her words and demands an explanation as to whether she was really able to escape that monster or failed and fell victim to his lust. Was this her husband speaking? She goes back and takes the thread right from the beginning – the fact that any Adil in this world could hide himself in a toilet (may be the apt place for his types) and try to drag her as low as his own level; the fact that her family despises her in spite of endless sacrifices she made for them; the fact that Sitara, the apple of her father's eye was an object of shame for him; the fact that the only people could understand her were her old mother and her kid-daughter and the fact that Adil, the culprit was still enjoying his wife's company and assistance, made Sitara see through the clouds of illusion, a stark reality of her own existence. She was too light for her parents to be kept at home and educated more, too light for a male colleague to be taken seriously, too light for the in-laws to be tolerated after a mishap, too light for a husband to be thought over and be cared for and too light for her female colleagues to be advised for future protection; instead, everybody at office is trying to tease her by advising her to should-have-seen the positive juicy side of the scandal by giving 'poor Adil a chance'— too light, too light, feather-light – this is her real worth!

Unlike earlier, this time she is not shattered or burnt to the core of her spirit but she keeps looking somewhere into a vacuum in space. Suddenly, a light dawned upon her – a reality, her own reality – her value in the eyes of her soul-mate. This has been, not an ill-luck or accident but a fire-test for her and her husband otherwise she would have never known the ultimate fact of her own

relationship with her husband. He has always been with her flesh and not her soul. He always belonged to the woman who ditched him and fled. For him, she remained a mystery nor could he win over her. On the other hand, Sitara never existed in this world for the people she thought they loved her – her father married her off when she was still incomplete at educational level, her in-laws brought her to nurse their son's wounds, Khalid used her as a flesh companion as well as a milking cow and she served everybody's interest with innocence on her part. What can be better than an undesirable woman remaining at distance, discharging day-long duties inside and outside the house and above all bringing in a handsome salary for which he never needs to say 'thank you'. Now that very Khalid has a face to demand an explanation about her chastity. No! Now she does not want to spit her anger on Adil. Those ugly moments with Adil no longer seem so hateful to her. With this realisation, she quietly gets up, hurries off to Adil's house and the horror stricken Adil hears the most unexpected words ever spoken to a criminal. Sitara thanks him with all her heart as it is only he who gave her the opportunity to know her own husband closely. She stands 'enlightened' with the knowledge that the adversity has offered her.

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