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Exploration of the Self in Shaukat Kaifi's *Kaifi & I*

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Abstract: This paper examines the exploration of the self in the memoir *Kaifi & I*. There are many negative stereotypes related to Indian Muslim women that need to be corrected. The paper seeks to understand how an Indian Muslim woman overcomes the obstacles and achieves her goals thereby challenging the stereotypes. Shaukat Kaifi was born into a Muslim noble family in Hyderabad. She was an eminent Indian theater and film actress. It is set amidst the background of a political and rebellious pre-independent India. The book documents not only about the personal life of Shaukat and Kaifi but also about various aspects of life before independence. Their lives are associated with the world of literature, poetry, theatre and politics. The present paper attempts to answer the following questions: Does the memoir enable her to express herself? How does Shoukat Kaifi represent herself? What are the reasons for recording her life? How does she delineate man-woman relationship and other familial relationships?

Key words- Memoir, Exploration of the self, Indian Muslims, stereotypical representation.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the exploration of the self in the memoir *Kaifi & I*. Autobiographical writing enables women to express themselves. There are many misconceptions related to Muslim women. Most of the literature available about Muslim women portray them as submissive, illiterate, passive and backward leading to negative stereotypes. Therefore, there is a need to rectify the stereotypical representation of Muslim women that can happen only when women themselves reveal the reality of their lives. Besides, the paper provides an insight into equal man-woman relationship and the reasons for a successful marital life thereby correcting the related misconceptions.

“*Kaifi & I*” is written in the form of a memoir. “A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked” (Vidal 5). It is based on the memory. The structure of the memoir, *Kaifi & I* is linear which begins with Shaukat’s childhood and ends with the death of Kaifi. The entire memoir is written in the first person narrative. Shaukat wants to share her life experiences with others as she feels that her life has been very active and she has had a lot to share with others. In the preface to her memoir *Kaifi & I*, she states,

“My life was not a simple one. There were constant ups and downs. I have seen poverty I had a desire to work for my country. I have been a part of the Communist Party. That time the Communist Party was playing a huge role in the independence movement of India and for the poor people of the country. I wanted to write a book on it.”

Speaking of her book *Kaifi and I* Shaukat states, “It is a book on my life and I have written exactly how I have spent my life. I haven’t exaggerated or made-up any story while writing the book.”

Although, memoir is a body of literature significantly smaller than fictional writings and poetry but nonetheless significant for our understanding of how women represent themselves. Women have chosen memoirs to share the reality of their lives. The memoir *Kaifi & I* presents a portrait of a woman who is a wife, mother, and an artiste. This story is not only of an individual, but also of the many. It deals with different themes – personal, political, women’s rights, communal violence, and domesticity, marital and familial relationship. It explores the relationship between Kaifi - a communist and a revolutionary poet and Shaukat, who later becomes a hugely talented theatre artiste. ‘*Kaifi and I*’ can be read as a romantic autobiography.

Shaukat Kaifi was born into a Muslim noble family in Hyderabad. She was an eminent Indian theater and film actress. She was married to the revolutionary Urdu poet and film lyricist, Kaifi Azmi. They had two children together, Shabana Azmi, a distinguished actress of Indian cinema and Baba Azmi, a renowned Cinematographer, and so a part of the Akhtar-Azmi family. She is an integral part of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), and member of the Communist Party of India. She wrote a memoir in Urdu, *Yaad ki Rehghuzar*, which had been translated into several languages, including English, Marathi, Hindi and even, Japanese. The English translated version *Kaifi and I* was translated by Nasreen Rehman, an award winning screenplay writer. The memoir has been adapted into a play *Kaifi aur Main* that premiered in 2006 on the 4th death anniversary of Kaifi Azmi in Mumbai.

The memoir, *Kaifi & I* offers a glimpse into Indian history told through the lives of Kaifi and Shaukat, a married couple. It is set amidst the background of a political and rebellious pre-independent India. The book documents not only about the personal life of Shaukat and Kaifi but also about various aspects of life before independence. Their lives are associated with the world of literature, poetry, theatre and politics.

Literature Review

The following are the reviews of the work done on Muslim women's memoirs.

Roselind, R & Others. *The Muslim Woman and Self: Reframing Conflict and Spiritual Awakening in Asra Nomani's Standing Alone*. The South Asian Journal of English Language Studies, April 2012.

This paper analyses Nomani's physical and spiritual journeys that transcend both geographical and imaginary borders and spaces. These transformations are reflected in her stages of conflict and spiritual awakening. It also attempts to correct the misconception about Islam as monolithic and traditional.

Janson, Eero. *Stereotypes that Define "US" the Case of Muslim Women*. University of Tartu, Estonia, ENDC Proceedings, Vol14, 2011.

This article emphasizes the need for the subaltern to speak for themselves in view of many misunderstandings related to Muslim women and their veil. It challenges the misassumptions related to head covering that is viewed as oppressive.

Jelodar, Esmaeil Zeiny. *Muslim Women's Memoirs: Disclosing Violence or Reproducing Islamophobia?* Asian Social Science, Vol 10, No 14, 2014. This paper claims that there has been a rise in writings by and about Islam post 9/11. Many of these works focus on the oppression of Muslim women. These are coming-of-age-memoirs, honor-killing memoirs, victim memoirs and escape memoirs. Islam in these texts is represented as a misogynist religion and thus creates Islamophobia. This paper analyses Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* (2003), *Honor Lost* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Therefore, shows how these memoirs instill fear and justifies western intervention.

Thus, the review shows that there is no enough work done on the topic. Moreover, most of the work done about Muslim women attempts to address the western idea of Muslims neglecting the fact that Muslims exists all around the world and they deserve to reveal themselves.

3. Methodology

Close reading and analysis of the primary source – Kaifi & I memoir supported by the secondary material using feminist and autobiographical perspective.

4. Results and Discussion

Shaukat Kaifi was a renowned theatre and film actress. She also acted in a number of films like *Garm Hawa* and *Umrao Jaan*. She was a bold, daring and ambitious woman. Shoukat was stubborn, proud, headstrong, and always ready to raise her voice against perceived injustice. She was very outspoken but her rebellious nature took full shape when she fell in love with Kaifi. Her rejection of the marriage arranged by her parents is an obvious act of defiance. As opposed to all the oppositions, she managed to construct a meaningful life with Kaifi.

Furthermore, Shoukat had to leave the lap of luxury to live with Kaifi and started living in a one-room home in Bombay. As a middle class woman, she chose the platform of theatre to earn her livelihood and she was proud of it. She balanced her life at home and successful career and managed to support herself and her family with meagre income. She worked along with her husband, Kaifi to bring about change in his village Mijwan and lived her life in complete harmony.

Shaukat describes in detail about the travails and pleasures of living in a commune as a married couple. She writes about how she did not want to cook in the living room, and how she found a way out of this problem. When she joined Prithvi Theatres, she had to strap Shabana, a four-month old child on her back and carry her to work because they could not afford a maid.

Shaukat Kaifi's life had been influenced by talented people, belonging to all genres — poets, filmmakers, actors. The memoir gives an account of the lives of poets and intellectuals like Sajjad Zaheer, Josh Malihabadi, Sardar Jafri, Ismat Chughtai, a group of people who despite their own commitments worked for the humanity.

She projects herself as a very strong woman. When she lost her child Khayyam, she was unable to overcome her grief. Her sorrow was unbearable. Gradually she learned to deal with it as she realized, "most people feel uncomfortable around those who cannot control their grief and tend to walk away from them." (69) She learned to control her behavior and hide her pain. Further, she went against the party's decision to abort the child and has her child who is now known as Shabana.

She highlights the obsession for a male child in the society. "India being a patriarchal society, it has male dominance and people are obsessed with having a male child". (P. Kumar 106). She recollects when she gave birth to her first baby who was a boy. Her mother in law lied to her neighbors that it was a girl thinking it would cast an evil eye on the child. Shoukat was astonished and showed concern, "I was surprised at the importance given to the birth of a male child. As a result of this there are some areas in India where young men cannot find brides, because there simply are not enough girls in the local population." (59-60)

Shaukat was a prominent stage and film actress and had so many awards to her credit. Despite her professional achievements, she was eager for learning even at the prime of her career. Her career had been shaped by several important theatre and film personalities including Prithviraj Kapoor, Zohra Sehgal, Alyque Padmasee, A.K Hangal, Mira Naira and Balraj Sahni.

Shaukat recollects how she started her career. After marriage, she was advised by Comrade P.C. Joshi that a wife of a communist can complement her husband only if she works to support her family. Those words made a strong impression on her and she decided to earn money to support herself. However, she was just a matriculate and so was difficult to find any job. Kaifi supported her decision and helped her find a job at the radio station.

Later, she joined theatre and thereby challenged the stereotypes related to middle class women of those times. Nevertheless, in 1950s, many people looked down upon theatre in general and in particular on the women who acted in it. She retorts, "I can do what you do in your homes, but can you stand on stage and deliver long dialogue? I can, and therefore I am superior to you. So, don't look upon theatre with distaste but learn to respect it" (93).

Shaukat Kaifi's career at theatre was significant because it established her as the best actress and brought her awards and recognition. Thus, the memoir as both testimony and an important document of theatre has made a significant contribution to Indian theatre.

Shaukat projects her marital relationship as an exemplary relationship. According to her, it was based on equality, mutual love, trust and understanding. She assumes the reason for failed marriages is lack of mutual understanding. She describes her husband Kaifi as a very liberal person who encouraged her to achieve her dreams.

Despite her father's apprehensions, Shoukat married Kaifi thereby choosing a life of hardship, as Kaifi had no regular income. She relates one incident to show how people made a mockery of their relationship but she stayed firm. Despite the financial problems, they had a satisfied marital life.

The memoir explores the two father-daughter relationships belonging to two different generations. On the one hand, relationship between Shoukat and her father Yahya Khan and on the other hand between Shabana Azmi and her father Kaifi Azmi. Both of the relationships are based on love and affection.

Shoukat's father "Yahya Khan was a champion of girl's education" (17). Despite the strong opposition from his entire family, he joined his daughters in the local mission school, a coeducational school, for he wanted the best of education for his daughters.

He was a liberal and broadminded person who shared a loving relationship with his daughter. As is evident when Shoukat received a letter written from Kaifi, she approached his father instead of her mother. She did not hesitate the least to discuss it with her father. She showed the letter to her father and declared, "I would marry none other than Kaifi" (39). Her father, she recalls, a friend to all his children reads Kaifi's letter and, as a concerned father cautions her. "Betye, a poet has a way with words that can sound terribly romantic, but it is hardly wise to take him seriously." (38)

Her father was worried about the future of his daughter with Kaifi when he discovered the poor condition in which he lived. Moreover, he did not have a regular source of income. Therefore, he tries to help Shaukat make a decision, which as he expects might have changed after observing the living conditions and he contends, "In our family, marriage is a commitment for life: a girl only leaves her husband's home when she dies. You will not be able to return home to us...I want a divorce for some reason or another" (45).

However, nothing seemed to deter Shaukat. Despite her father's apprehensions, she decided to marry Kaifi and was ready to take the responsibility of her own marriage.

Ultimately, he supported Shaukat's decision and arranged for marriage without consulting anyone, not even Shaukat's mother for the fact that she would never agree to his or her marriage. Later, he had to face the wrath of her mother who would not speak to him for over a month when she learnt about their marriage.

Similarly, the second type of father-daughter relationship presented between Kaifi and Shabana Azmi is also based on love and affection. Kaifi is represented as a great human being, an exemplary husband and a doting father. Shaukat explains Kaifi's attitude towards his children, "Kaifi adored his children and his relationship with them was that of a friend. If they faltered, he did not lose his temper, but tried to reason with them. He would go to great lengths to make them happy" (153).

Kaifi was a modern and broad-minded person. He was free from patriarchal ideology. He was the strong advocator of women's rights. His attitudes and values played a pivotal role in determining his daughter's personality and career. He was always supportive of his daughter's decisions. After graduation, Shabana asked Kaifi about taking up an acting career and he replied, "I'll support any choice you make. If you choose to become a cobbler I shall support you, provided you become the best cobbler in the business" (116). Kaifi always supported and encouraged his daughter.

5. Conclusion

As discussed above, there are many misassumptions related to Muslim women. The paper has attempted to correct these misassumptions related to Indian Muslim women through an analysis of the memoir *Kaifi & I* by Shaukat Kaifi. The paper depicts how an Indian Muslim woman overcomes the obstacles and achieves her goals thereby challenging the stereotypes. Shaukat Kaifi represents herself as a strong willed and progressive who could go to any extent to achieve what she wanted. Similarly, her husband, Kaifi was much ahead of her time who believed in gender equality. The paper explores the relationship between Kaifi - a communist and a revolutionary poet and Shaukat, who later became a hugely talented theatre artiste. They lived a happy and satisfied marital life as opposed to the usual depiction of unequal and unhappy relationships. However, the present study overlooks less privileged section of Muslim society who are deprived of education and economic independence. Yet, the main idea is to provide inspiration to all the

women to overcome obstacles in order to achieve their goals. The future research can be conducted in the comparative analysis of the works of Muslim women to the women from different religious and regional backgrounds.

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