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## **A Feminist Reading on Khadeeja Mumtaz's *Barsa***

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts a study on Khadeeja Mumtaz's *Barsa*, a Malayalam novel critiquing the position of women in Muslim society. The author discusses many practices in the society which subjugate women because of misinterpretation of the religion and ignorance of the women and the need for protecting their rights.

**Key words:** Barsa- Khadeeja Mumtaz- position of Muslim women

### **Article**

The position of women in Islam has been one of the most controversial aspects of Islam. The status of women in Islam has been a much debated topic both in the political and cultural spheres in Kerala. This paper attempts to explore the position of women in closed Muslim religious and social systems through Khadeeja Mumtaz's novel *Barsa* (2007) and the crucial question posed by the author "how are women really treated in Islam?"

The title of the novel *Barsa*, a work by a Muslim woman, means 'a woman with uncovered face', the term used by Fathima Mernisi in her work *Women and Islam*, shows how much Islam gives importance to the dress code of women and it is the journey of Sabitha, the protagonist, with uncovered face. The novel shows that a woman in Islam does not have any walls and free to travel anywhere, but they are within the same walls even though how much they travel to find out the women's version of Islam is the primary object of *Barsa*. Instead of finding out patriarchal version of Islam, Sabitha finds out women's reading of Islam. In the traditional point of view women should live within four walls according to the society, but Sabitha tried to destroy those walls and get out of it. Like entering into the life of Rasheed, Sabitha also entered into another religion i.e., Islam. This entering and her changing of religion from Hindu into Islam did not affect her spirituality.

In the current day discourses, many discussions carried out the position of women in Muslim community. However, in Kerala, a much acclaimed progressive state, such debates are not yet accepted in the public realm, because most of the rigid religious practices entwined here with the traditional customs. Even when someone attempts to redefine any of the traditionally bound religious practices, he/she will have to face many restrictions from within the community.

The work *Barsa*, a critique of the irrational religious and socio-cultural practices prevailing in the Muslim community, is highly significant in this context. Through her creative writings Mumtaz has been representing the subjection of women particularly within the patriarchally constrained religious system. Her effort was innovative and it shows Khadeeja Mumtaz dared to write against the religious system as a Muslim, which according to Mumtaz was evidently male dominated. Thus the novel *Barsa*, is about recurring and excruciating questions of an educated Muslim lady, a doctor, who spent six years in a hospital in Saudi Arabia. The novelist questions the male-centered social structure through her experiences in the hospital with other doctors, staff and patients from different parts of the world.

The study tries to highlight author's representations against the socio-cultural and religious ideologies that subject women, particularly within the Muslim community. Being a woman who experienced and witnessed several unjustifiable practices within the community, Mumtaz critiques the solid structures of religion through her act of writing, which in effect, turns out a political act for her. Her writing itself especially *Barsa*, is a protest

against the established socio-political and religious system. She portrays the realities behind religious ideologies and the ways in which the religion itself becomes a tool in the hands of patriarchy and the status of women in the Muslim community. In the essay titled “Muslimsthrree Islamine Vayikkunu, Jeevithatheyum”, Kunjammu says that, “actually the novel, *Barsa* is a medium for the author to register her protest against the anarchies prevailed in the society against women” (Kunjammu 15)

The author pictures the women characters whose life tangled within different layers of relations: marital, sexual, economic, religious and the like that run within the domesticity in a patriarchally bound society. The story revolves around the life of Sabitha. Even the minor women characters represent strong female voice, but they never act beyond the boundaries within which they are being caged. The story is typically about a Muslim family and the problems women face in such a confined ambience.

In the interview titled “Pardhayil Aval Nirnayikapedunundo?” Kadheeja Mumtaz says that seven years of life, experience and thoughts in the Gulf made her to learn about Islam and inspired to write *Barsa*. She says that Islam is occupied with high values and it has the worth to decline the discrimination in the socialistic democratic world. Most of the religious, political and social peoples wish to place Islam in the same position. In Kadheeja Mumtaz’s view, Islam is not a closed one but the religious system is the closed one and it dangled in unresponsiveness and in apathy (<http://sarpagandhi.blogspot.in/2008/05/blog-post.html>).

She says that now Islam does not have conviction and spirituality and it is only a path of most of them to reach a position in political and social spheres and they treated Islam as religion. They enclose women in the name of dress code because they did not think beyond that and tried to threaten in the name of Quran. There are many reasons to protest but they remained women in the sixth century itself and cannot understand why all of them targeted against women and this makes them to rebel against all these indifferences.

In the introduction Kadheeja Mumtaz says:

It is important that at first Islam gave a position to women in the society but now most of the women are in wretched condition within the four walls. In Muslim society most of the women led their life in a desolate way. In this pathetic situation also women strongly maintain their tolerance and become a representation to the society. The religious conviction made the women a secondary one in the society. This made to think that Islam should be read and interpreted by women. (8)

Muslim expositors and preachers tell the world that Islam elevates women, so this proves their religion’s truthfulness. They imply that the entire world, especially women, should therefore warmly embrace Islam. Throughout the novel one can discover how religious ideologies work at the humane level, especially in women’s space, putting their life at risk. Muhammad Khan is pictured as a typical Muslim male, who blindly follows the religious norms and possesses very little concern and respect for women. He did nothing other than investing his time and energy in the process of suppressing women folk at his home. Religion is an easy way out for him to justify his deeds.

This clearly demonstrates how a woman is treated as a mere object in the marriage market. The patriarchal society in the novel always tries to value women in terms of her ancestry and wealth. Even in the contemporary society these norms are the leading principles to evaluate a girl’s position in the marriage market. Mumtaz exposes the commonsensical notions within the community about the marital age and youthfulness of girls.

This shows the typical attitude of the society where patriarchal norms reign at its zenith. What is more pathetic is the ways in which Sabitha submits herself to all these filthy acts, without questioning his autocracy—a kind of silent acquiescence. Mumtaz thus effectively brings out the facts that the individual is complicit in her own

subjection. She marks herself being passive and obedient, born to suffer tortures. Both the religious and patriarchal ideologies persuade her to take her suffering as a natural course. Thus, one can say that Mumtaz is obliquely talking about ideology which is rooted deeply not only in the mind of society but in the mind of the victim itself.

In this novel, religious questions and elements often surround the discussions of social concerns that *Barsa* is very greatly directed to social problems. Though Khadeeja Mumtaz addresses religion in the frame of reference of other social issues, the author's consideration of religion and its relation to other issues are also portrayed in *Barsa*. Across national boundaries, women and their identities, social status and bodies have received a central place in these debates. The emancipation of women – or the lack of it – often appear as a central theme. Islam, then, has become, in the eyes of many, inherently opposed to freedom, democracy and gender equality, values that are the supposed hallmarks of secular societies.

The discourse of silence remains a major subject in *Barsa*. Deborah Cameron explains this phenomenon of silence when she states that women's voices are not silent but silenced, "for it is not just that women don't speak; often they are explicitly prevented from speaking either by social taboos and restrictions or by more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice" (25). Thus by writing this novel, Khadeeja Mumtaz tried to express her feelings and wishes as a Muslim woman, there by subverting the system from within. In this novel the author uses Sabitha, to reveal the silences of a Muslim woman because she is an outsider of the Muslim community, i.e. she belongs to Hindu community. Khadeeja Mumtaz's 'the very act of writing in itself challenges, language as a masculine order dominated by the phallus and women remain marginal to language' (9). Thus the novel proves that, by daring into a male tradition, that is, writing, these articulate women succeed in negotiating power with their men.

Khadeeja Mumtaz is concerned with a number of issues that affect women in the Muslim world. Two main subjects occupy centre stage in Islamic feminist discourse, namely marriage and sexuality. The problem relating to marriage that Muslim women writers address include early marriage for teenage girls, which is based on the idea of protecting the girl from violation or unwanted pregnancy. Through this novel Khadeeja Mumtaz strives for the eliminations of all practices that regard women's needs as secondary to men's and ultimately, it emphasizes a need for change in male attitude towards women in the Islamic world, as Bruner observes, "these articulate women share a hope, if not a promise, that a new world order of equality and empathy could exist, based not on might, coercion and violence, but on mutual respect and understanding" (76). Through this novel Khadeeja Mumtaz also attacks the Muslim marriage and attacks it as one of the institutions. She portrays marriage as a social contract in which family members choose a husband for a girl without seeking either her consent or her approval of the prospective groom and the author succeeds in portraying Muslim marriage as an institution through which female manipulation is enforced. Mumtaz also shows that Muslim marriage is one of the areas in which patriarchal oppression of women is most visible and intense.

Khadeeja Mumtaz vividly captures the conflict between cultural demands on women and their freedom from oppression. The author also concerns about the abandonment of women, a social malaise that transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste. Arguably, female abandonment is a universal problem which yields both physical and psychological consequences for women. As in *Barsa*, female abandonment emerges as a central theme. The central female character, Sabitha, is abandoned by their society. In spite of their disheartening experiences, this woman succeeds in stepping out of the muddy pool of abandonment and making a life of their own. Although female abandonment is a universal feminine problem, the distinctive experience of each woman cannot be ignored.

In *Barsa*, the different reactions of Sabitha and her husband to polygamy raise a number of questions as what course the feminist movement should take in a culture-sensitive environment like the Islamic society. One wonders whether Muslim women should continue to endure the oppressive yoke of tradition while at the same time seeking ways to enlighten their husband and men in general on the solidarity which should exist between man and woman, as Sabitha does or whether they should reject all practices that keep women enslaved to men and pursue an independent life. It is important to note that Khadeeja Mumtaz does not condemn Islamic cultural values, but she does critique those aspects of culture which put women at a disadvantage vis-a-vis men. What she advocates is a union or marriage between culture and women's human rights on a platform of mutual respect and reciprocal accommodation.

Khadeeja Mumtaz is one among the prominent writers to emerge from the Muslim community. *Barsa* is particularly relevant to feminist discourse as it raises a number of arguments. The novel centers on the life of Sabitha, a young doctor, who confronted by obstacles, triumphs over male domination as she moves from Kerala to Gulf. Sabitha, a Nair woman got married a Muslim, has to adopt a self-assertive stance in order to survive in a system in which women's desire is overshadowed by societal expectations.

Sabitha begins her interrogation of patriarchal norms by re-invoking the matriarchal trend in which spiritual power lies with the female. Her quest for self-assertion inevitably involves defying the law and transgressing taboos, especially those pertaining to male-female relationships. She has a strong sense of self often manifests itself as a rebellion. In the end, she gains strength by withstanding the storms of patriarchal coercion.

Thus, the position of women in Muslim societies is readily susceptible to misunderstanding. In the first place, most of the women in these societies are illiterate, because of this they form their own ideas about what is Islamic, something which can be very far off from the official teachings. Also, they are confronted with local religious leaders who in some cases have a little more or equal schooling than ordinary believers. Thus, what women are facing and challenging is not necessarily religion, but religion as it is explained at the local level. Explanations are mingled with local traditions and hence are heavily influenced by the prevailing balance of power. Thus, when social norms and codes are used in a counteraction sense, due to the lack of knowledge, women have no means to question their religious basis. In cases where women have been fully aware of their rights under *Shari'a*, expressing their views against customary norms or religious institutions is difficult due to the complete absence of a socio-legal culture on gender egalitarian society.

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