

Revisiting the Peripheries in *Meatless Days*: Unveiling Gender and Religious Discourse in Pakistan

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I think we dimly knew we were about to witness Islam's departure from the land of Pakistan. The men would take it to the streets and make it vociferate, but the great romance between religion and populace, the embrace that engendered Pakistan, was done. (Suleri 1989, p. 15)

The Taliban's obtrusive implementation of rigid and misinterpreted version of Islamic laws in the northern areas of Pakistan has led to the destruction of girl schools and the attempted assassination of a fourteen year old female education activist Malala Yousafzai.¹ The rise of Islamic fundamentalism has once again sparked a debate about the intersections of religion and gender, resulting in women's further marginalization in the Pakistani society. Like many other Postcolonial theocratic societies, there is a rise in feminist voices in Pakistan which are trying to resist and counter patriarchal social structures and male interpretations of religion to oppress women. Initiated by the military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, the process of Islamization in Pakistan strengthened the male faction of the society and marginalized and silenced the women by denying them their due space and rights.

Meatless Days, written in geographical and temporal dislocation, is embedded with social and political connotations. It records the memories of Sara Suleri and her protest against female subjugation and suppression through false, misconstrued and wrong interpretation of Islamic laws in the Pakistani society. Suleri, with most of her formative years in Pakistan, has interwoven the turbulent phase of her country with the reminiscences of tragic events in her family and tried to theorize the problematic issues of gender, religion and Pakistan as a Postcolonial nation. The memoir further seeks to explore a patriarchal society where religion is used to circumscribe and exploit women.

¹Malala Yousafzai, a fourteen year student, is a female education activist in the once Taliban occupied and ruled Pakistani Town Mingora, in the district of Swat. She wrote a blog for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), under the pseudonym Gul Makai (Urdu translation for corn flower), to keep her true identity a secret from the militants. Her blog gave the details of her fear stricken and disturbed life in Mingora under the Taliban rule and her views advocating the right of education for the girls of her area. She was nominated for an International Children's Peace Prize, awarded National Youth Peace Prize by the Government of Pakistan, made several appearances on the Pakistani media and appeared in a documentary made by the New York Times. She was shot by the Taliban in Swat on 9 October 2012 for openly speaking against their policies and criticizing them for destroying and shutting down schools for girls. Luckily, she survived and is currently living in the UK.

For Suleri, Pakistan is a place that never promised an easy breathing space for women and reduced them to a subdued community in the society. On the very first page of *Meatless Days*, Suleri claims:

My reference is to a place where the concept of a woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant. (Suleri 1989, p. 1)

In Pakistan, a woman's biological roles define her identity which is either dependant on, or subservient to, her male counterparts. The use of the pronoun 'we' in this quote refers to all the determining and defining factions of a society, both social and political, which fails to determine a respectable position for women in Pakistan. *Meatless Days* gives a voice to Suleri's dissatisfaction with the social structure of her country for denying its women any space or significance. She has reversed this situation in her memoir by giving a lot more space to female characters compared to the male ones. Four chapters out of a total of nine are named after women and the other five tell many tales and anecdotes from the lives of the women close to her.

Each female character in *Meatless Days* reflects upon the national scenario through her own lens but none of them seem satisfied with the scheme of things in the social and political arena of Pakistan. The frustration of these characters is evident throughout the memoir, but the prospects of finding any means of catharsis are absent. They feel suppressed and suffocated. Sara's mother always seemed lost, absorbed and always succumbing to her husband by saying 'what an excellent thing' in response to every query. Her grandmother found solace in food which became a way for her to communicate with her son and family. Suleri's sister, *Ifat*, was always biting her lips, expressing her inability to harmonize with the male dominant society of Pakistan. All the female characters in the memoir are dominated by the male members of the household. Mr. Suleri, Sara's father, manhandled everybody at his home and particularly subjugated the women because of his domineering and authoritative personality.

Female identity in Pakistan is very much interlinked with the place of Islam in the socio-political structures of the country. The idea of Pakistan, translated as the 'land of the pure',² was first conceived and later realized in the name of Islam. The Pakistani society

² The acronym Pakistan was developed by a group of students studying at Cambridge University in 1933 who published a pamphlet titled *Now or Never*. The word Pakistan means the land of spiritually and religiously pure

presents an attempt to create a blend of religious fundamentalism with the state, where basic Islamic principles are an integral part not only of state laws but also of the development of civil society. The place of Islam in the social and political layers of the country has been an issue ever since the creation of Pakistan, the only country in the world that was founded on the basis of religious ideology.³ Islam was the major reason, and the driving force, in the unity of the Muslims of the subcontinent. It rationalized their movement and struggle for independence. It was religion which engendered the ‘two nation theory’ and became the main reason for the emergence of the ‘Muslim nationhood’ in the subcontinent that subsequently led to the creation of Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, though previously known to be a secular person and ambassador of Hindu Muslim unity, became the leading spokesman⁴ for an independent Muslim state for the people of the region. After independence, Islam was immediately pushed to the background with the appearance of many other controversial political issues in Pakistan. The place of Islam in the country’s constitution and its role in politics remained undecided for quite a long period of time after 1947, adding to the already prevailing atmosphere of political chaos, stagnation and uncertainty. Suleri,⁵ in his book *Pakistan’s Lost Years* comments:

Three factors bedeviled Pakistan’s national life: continued preoccupation with constitution-making and the suspense caused thereby; stalemate and stagnation in the political process and lastly confusion and uncertainty in assigning the place of Islam in the country’s polity. Islam was involved both in constitution-making and party politics. (Suleri 1962, p. 3)

people. The idea behind the name was to bring together Muslims of the Subcontinent under one flag and unite them in their struggle for a separate homeland.

³ Religious nationalism rather than other consideration was the basic premise which was at the heart of the struggle of the Muslims of the subcontinent. See, for instance, Hafeez Malik, *Moslem Nationalism in India and Pakistan* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1963); Khalid B. Saeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase, 1857-1948* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁴ For a study of Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s personality and politics, see Sharif-ul-Mujahid, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah: Studies in Interpretation* (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 1981); Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (New York: Oxford University Press; 1984); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Saad R. Khairi, *Jinnah Reinterpreted: The Journey from Indian Nationalism to Muslim Statehood* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ian Byrant Wells, *Ambassador of Hindu Muslim Unity: Jinnah’s Early Politics* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

⁵ Z. A. Suleri, apart from his editorials and columns in the newspapers, has written many books with a particular focus on Islam as a dominating religion of the world, on politics of the subcontinent during the pre and post-independence era and on his unqualified support for the various military regimes of Pakistan. His books include *The Road to Peace and Pakistan* (Lahore: Sheikh Mohammad Ashraf, 1946); *My Leader, being an estimate of Mr. Jinnah’s work for Indian Mussalmans* (Lahore: Lion Press, 1946); *Pakistan’s Lost Years* (Lahore: Feroze Sons, 1962); *Politicians and Ayub: Being a Survey of Pakistani Politics from 1948-1964* (Rawalpindi: Capital Law and General Law Book Depot, 1964); *Masla-i-Afghanistan* (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1981); *Al-Quran* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1989); *Shaheed-E-Millat Liaqat Ali Khan, Builder of Pakistan* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1990); *Influence of Islam on World Civilization* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1994).

Islam as a religious ideology has been exploited by the political leaders of Pakistan to hoodwink the masses. Both political and military governments were unsure about defining religion's role in running the affairs of the state. Consequently Islam has been (mis)used differently by successive governments. This uncertainty regarding the status of religion on the national level also got replicated on the social and individual scale. Ian Almond, in *The New Orientalists: Postmodern representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, also endorses Suleri's case when he speaks of Rushdie's views about Islam's political position in Pakistan:

Rushdie in novels such as *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, often observes how Islam is invoked to facilitate the nationalisms proclaimed by the newly born states of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Whether it is Commanders-in-Chief who quote the Quran, descriptions of Pakistan as 'Al-Lah's new country' (*Shame*, p. 69), Quranic promises of paradise and virgin *houris* to would-be war heroes or the Karachi TV chief who considers 'pork' to be a 'four-letter word' (*ibid.*, p. 70), Rushdie deftly delineates and comments upon the various hypocrisies involved when nation-states employ the faith of their peoples to justify and colour their own self-seeking policies. (Almond 2007, p. 100-101)

Suleri questions the influence of religion and religious discourse in defining almost everything in the social and political milieu of Pakistan. She tries to highlight how it marginalized the women in the country. This misuse of Islam had a catachrestic influence on the identity of the women. The version of Islam imposed upon the Pakistani society by General Zia further strengthened the concept that women's role in the social structure of the country was ineffective. By categorizing them through the master word 'women', they are ironically deprived of their individual identity and existence. In *Meatless Days*, the true recognition of the female characters is in their social and biological roles and not in their free and independent self. The master word 'women' has no literal referent. It only casts an abusive effect on the lives and experiences of those whom it claims to define. Spivak condemns the impact that the use of such master words has and claims that:

...master words are catachresis...that there are no literal referents, there are no 'true' examples of the 'true worker', the 'true woman', the 'true proletarian' who would actually stand for the ideals in terms of which you have mobilized. (Spivak 1990, 104)

The political discourse claims to provide a true picture of these groups but for Spivak it is an impossibility to represent a true woman or a true worker. The vocabulary of political, anti-colonial movements use master or abstract words to name and define the histories, experiences and struggles of minorities as women, workers and colonized. Calling them 'women' does not give them an identity; its catachrestic nature further relegates them to an

abyss of non-existence. Moreover, viewing them only as the extensions of their roles in the family does not do justice to their existence and identity. It only highlights the incompleteness embedded in the meaning of this word.

The intersections of gender and religion in a postcolonial society has been a significant area of interest for feminist researchers who raise their voices against the subjugation of women on the basis of biological differences. Moreover, these feminist critics have tried to highlight how a constructed religious discourse facilitated the patriarchal social structures, the domination by men in and outside their homes and diminished any chances of social emancipation for women. Ania Loomba comments on the phenomena that: ‘many postcolonial regimes have been out rightly repressive of women’s rights, using religion as the basis on which to enforce their subordination’ (Loomba 1998, p. 189). Nayar further points out that, ‘often – and this applies to Hindi, Christian and Muslim societies – religious doctrines and theology were deployed to justify unequal gender relations and unfair social structures’ (Nayar 2008, p. 142). Pakistani society, Suleri believes, has also used Islam to reduce women to roles simply based upon their physical appearance, thus ameliorating the male domination and supremacy. She comments:

...we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance. Or else it was a hugely practical joke, we thought, hidden somewhere among our clothes. But formulating that definition is about as impossible as attempting to locate the luminous qualities of an Islamic landscape. (Suleri 1989, p. 2)

In spite of women being a majority in Pakistan and of Islam being present in every affair of the country, finding a definition for both remains a mystery to Suleri. The country, founded in the name of Islam and its society being very proudly vocal of the fact, fails to convince Suleri of its true Islamic characteristics. Similarly, various characters in *Meatless Days* respond differently to the issue of religion at different occasions in their lives. Sara’s grandmother, shown to be an ardent lover of God, is always the one in the family who imprecates Satan, loves God, converses with Him and gives uninvited sermons of her own to the people on the road. She is even very meticulous in the performance of her religious rituals. Sara observes her religious eccentricities:

In the winter I see her alone, painstakingly dragging her straw mat out to the courtyard at the back of the house and following the rich course of the afternoon sun. With her would go her Quran, a metal basin in which she could wash her hands, and her ridiculously heavy spouted water pot, that was made of brass. None of us, according to Dadi, were quite pure enough to transport these particular items. (Suleri 1989, p. 6)

In April, following the trying times of 1971, she suffers from severe burns while making tea in the kitchen one night and undergoes not just physical but spiritual transformation as she ‘left her long kept friend God and forgot to pray’ (Suleri 1989, p. 15). The metamorphoses that the grandmother undergoes happen just before Pakistan witnesses a major change in the course of its history: the Islamization of Pakistan. General Zia-ul-Haq announces the third martial law in the country on 5 July 1977 and takes refuge in Islam to perpetuate his rule.⁶ General Zia’s efforts to base the legal system of Pakistan on the Islamic laws are an attempt to gain political benefits.⁷ He announces ‘Hudud Ordinance’⁸ and many other punitive laws based upon the basic Islamic principles and decreed a ban on many major cultural activities, including music and theatrical performances. Many such laws, particularly ‘Hudud Ordinance’, were misused against women who were prosecuted and punished for adultery even when they were victims of rape. Islam came out from homes and mosques and went into the streets of Pakistan. Religious groups and organizations were empowered by Zia and served as a tool in perpetuating his rule. Sara witnesses this religious maneuvering of the nation and comments:

We dimly knew we were about to witness Islam’s departure from the land of Pakistan. The men would take it to the streets and make it vociferate, but the great romance between religion and the populace, the embrace that engendered Pakistan, was done. (Suleri 1989, p. 15)

Mr. Z. A. Suleri, the most influential and authoritative person in the home, also underwent a complete change from being secular to religious, during General Zia’s Islamization campaign. Mr. Suleri, who never showed any religious inclination at any point in his life, started to pray, and Sara’s grandmother, who had always claimed God to be her best friend, suddenly stopped praying.

That was a change, when Dadi patched herself together again and forgot to put prayer back into its proper pocket, for God could now leave the home and soon

⁶ There is considerable literature available on the Islamization process initiated by General Zia-ul-Haq and its consequences on the religious milieu of Pakistan. Rubya Mehdi contends that the Islamization process has not only been superficial leaving much of the Anglo-Muhammadan law intact but it was ineffective and incoherent in practice, for details see Rubya Mehdi, *The Islamisation of the Law in Pakistan* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1994); Also see “Pakistan: The Many Faces of an Islamic Republic” in John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Martin Lau, *The Role of Islam in Legal System of Pakistan* (London: Martinus Nijhoff, 2006).

⁷ Ayesha Jalal’s *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan’s Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) gives a detailed account of Zia’s politically motivated exploitation of Islamic laws.

⁸ For a study of working and impact of Hudud Ordinance see Tahir Wasti, *The Application of Islamic Criminal Law in Pakistan* (Lieden: Brill, 2009); Charles H. Kennedy, “Islamization in Pakistan: Implementation of the Hudud Ordinance”, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (2006); Martin Lau, “Twenty Five Years of Hudud Ordinances-A Review”, *Washington & Lee Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (2008).

would join the government. Papa prayed and fasted and went on pilgrimage and read the Quran aloud with most peculiar locutions. (Suleri 1989, p. 15)

The transformation of Mr. Suleri and Sara's grandmother symbolises that Islam, in General Zia's era, was not meant to be women's aide, but that it was men's possession to be exploited and politicized. Sara openly expresses her disgust for General Zia for turning the Pakistani people into patriarchal religious fanatics and throughout the memoir calls him not by his real name but as 'General Zulu'.⁹ The General brought Islam to the streets, made it the property of masculine and politicized it to ensure his prolonged dictatorship. Also commenting on General Zia's Islamization of the Pakistani society, Rushdie is of the view that:

so-called Islamic 'fundamentalism' does not spring, in Pakistan, from the people. It is imposed on them from above. Autocratic regimes find it useful to espouse the rhetoric of faith, because people who respect that language, are reluctant to oppose it. This is how religion shore up dictators; by encircling them with words of power, words which people are reluctant to see, discredited, disenfranchised, mocked. (Rushdie 1995, p. 251)

General Zia's rhetoric of Islam empowered the masculine both in the homes and the social ethos of the country. Women were silenced and suppressed, and the true essence of their existence was further lost. Calling women, 'women', in the Pakistani society, does not give them an identity but only means to restrict them to their bodies and roles assigned by the religion. Suleri could not find any respectable concept of woman in the Pakistani society, apart from that of a hugely practical joke. Women are an absence in Pakistan for Suleri and the only female characters in her memoir are either members of her family or close friends.

Mair Jones,¹⁰ Sara's mother, is one of the many displaced and marginalized women in the memoir. A Welsh lady by birth, wed to Mr. Z. A. Suleri and settled in Pakistan, she found herself displaced while being in Lahore and trying to be part of a nation whose memories of a sour colonial past were still fresh and made her feel an outsider. In spite of her continuous efforts to become part of Pakistani society, she was always looked upon with the suspicion and doubt which the once colonized Pakistani nation reserved for a woman belonging to a colonizer race. Sara writes:

⁹ General Zulu is the derogatory name that Sara Suleri has used on many occasions in *Meatless Days* to express her hatred and contempt for the third Chief Martial Law Administrator and ex-president of Pakistan General Zia-ul-Haq.

¹⁰ Mair Jones, Sara Suleri's mother was a Welsh lady by birth and met Mr. Z. A. Suleri in London in mid 1940s. She married Mr. Suleri, embraced Islam, came to Pakistan after the Indo-Pak partition and became a lecturer in English at the University of Punjab. She has an Islamic name Surraya Suleri to which Sara often refers to in *Meatless Days*.

The touching good faith of her Pakistani passport could hardly change the fact that even as my mother thought she was arriving, she actually had returned. There were centuries' worth of mistrust of English women in their eyes when they looked at her who chose to come after the English should have been gone: what did she mean by saying. 'I wish to be part of you?' Perhaps, they feared, she mocked. (Suleri 1989, p. 163)

Her role in the family was also determined as that of an 'other'. Her character is set in contrast to Mr. Suleri, her husband, who, being a man of authority and dominance throughout the memoir, enjoys absolute control not only over her but over the whole family. Mair Jones lived in subservience to Mr. Suleri, not as his life partner. Suleri claims that, 'Papa's powerful discourse would surround her night and day – when I see her in his room, she is always looking down, gravely listening' (Suleri 1989, p.157). Moreover, her identity, for most of the memoir, is determined and defined through her responsibilities as a wife or mother. Mair Jones' place in the Suleri family confirms the fact that men, in patriarchal societies, reduce women to mere physicality and see them as machines which give birth to and nurture their offspring. Nayar comments:

Women's literature from South Asia, Africa, South America, and African Americans in the USA see themselves as situated at the intersection of three repressive discourses and structures: racism, imperialism and sexism...Sexism, at the hands of an oppressive patriarchy even in native societies, reduced them to machines of reproduction and labour. (Nayar 2008, p. 120)

Even Sara herself, throughout the *Meatless Days*, calls her mother 'Mamma' and not as Mair Jones or *Surrayya Suleri* (the Islamic name given to her after her marriage with Z. A. Suleri) with few exceptions. She is neither Mair nor Surraya but 'Mamma', representing her role and duties only. Mair Jones achieved a fluid equilibrium between "syntax" and "name", between social interactions and individuality. This continuous realization of being an outcast and an 'other', of not belonging to the Pakistani nation, makes her resign her claims to an individual identity as well as her legitimate place in both her family and the society.

She learned to live apart, then — apart even from herself — growing into that curiously powerful disinterest in owing, in belonging, which years later would make her so clearly tell her children, 'Child, I will not grip.' She let commitment and belonging become my father's domain, learning instead the way of walking with tact on other people's land. (Suleri 1989, p. 164)

Her linguistic inability further marginalized her in society. Being a Welsh lady, it becomes difficult for her to communicate with her grandchildren in English even because of their upbringing in Pakistan and an excessive exposure to Urdu. Ultimately, she finds herself unconsciously adopting the role of a typical, subdued, less privileged, Indian family woman by accepting her fate and resigning quietly to her private self. Sara has been a witness to her

mother's alienation and resignation which has haunted her ever since. Her mother's failure to find the expected energy of a newly liberated nation, her inability to bring about any change in her husband's thinking, in spite of her repeated efforts, and the impossibility to adjust herself in a nation of multifarious histories and languages made her acquiesce to silence.

Sara's sister also had to pay a heavy price for being a female in a patriarchal Pakistan. She was a combination of grace, arrogance and self-will like her father but was always noticed because of her physical grace and beauty. She was disowned by Mr. Suleri for being strong and rebellious, as she preferred to disregard her father's authority and marry the person of her choice:

she chose to enter into the heart of Pakistan in the most un-Pakistan way possible: she ran away from Kinnaird and called home a few days later to say, bravely, 'Papa, I am married.' 'Congratulations' he replied, put down the phone, and refused to utter her name again for years. (Suleri 1989, p. 141)

She succumbed to the authority of her husband instead of her father's. It was the men who ruled the household in Pakistan. In order to live with her husband's family she had to accept, internalize a new set of rules and become a part of an alien and strange world. Suleri spoke of this change in her life:

What energies my sister devoted to Pakistan! First she learned how to speak Punjabi and then graduated to the Jehlum dialect, spoken in the region from which Javed's family came. She taught herself the names and stations of hundred-odd relations, intuiting how each of them would wish to be addressed. She learned more than I will ever know about the history of the army and then she turned to polo's ins and outs. (Suleri 1989, p. 141)

While talking to Sara about the jeopardy that women have to face in Pakistan, her sister once said: 'it doesn't matter Sara Men live in homes, and women live in bodies' (Suleri 1989, p. 143). Men have everything to own and govern, whereas women are restricted only to one thing they possess: their body. Unfortunately this sole possession is also continuously subjected to physical, verbal and all other forms of oppressions and atrocities by the domineering male members of the society.

Meatless Days is overt in highlighting Pakistani or Third World women as a silenced community. They have always been directed by the dominating male members in their families who use Islam, the God's word, to govern, monitor, silence, suppress and marginalize them. Sangeeta Ray further endorses the fact: 'it appears that in modern Pakistan, women can be conveniently silenced or easily replaced, being just another wife, mother, or daughter' (Ray 1993, p. 54). Women's existence is so subdued and marginalized in the Pakistani community that their presence becomes meaningless. By situating the tales of

women in her text, Suleri explores how the (mis)use of religious discursive practices led to the stereotyping of women and how this stereotyping became a part of the social structure. She further points out that, by creating a nexus between religion and politics, a dictator was able to restructure the social strata of his country. Women suffered the most during the process as religion and politics joined hands and empowered the men, not just within the homes, but virtually everywhere in society. Women's contribution in any phenomena of social or national development was ruled out and they were simply limited to their household roles. This denial of any space and roles for the women in the Pakistani society eliminated any chances of their progressive role and made them an outcast. By presenting the deprived and manipulated women in the Pakistani society, Suleri demands that the social, political and religious discourse, intentionally used to marginalize women in Pakistan, should be revisited, redefined and restructured.

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