

Commodification and Objectification of Women in Shahid Nadeem's Plays *Kala Meda Bhes (Black is My Robe)* and *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)*

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Abstract

*The study explored and discussed the commodification and objectification of women in Shahid Nadeem's plays *Kala Meda Bhes (Black is My Robe)* and *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)*. Both the plays presented the accurate picture of deep-seated discriminatory sociocultural and patriarchal traditions where men have the position of authority and esteem whereas women are considered subordinates, submissive and weak. In his plays, Shahid Nadeem introduced a vast range of female characters in challenging circumstances where women act as puppets and men act as their masters. Men and women, are assigned different gender roles in Pakistan due to biological essentialism and social constructionism and the clash between the two, was the primary cause of women's sufferings in a male dominated society. Women are chattels who are attained in the name of marriage to serve men throughout their lives. The male dominated social system is built upon traditional hierarchies where men have put themselves on top and women are given the lower position. The present study discussed that women are objects for exchange with a trade value and are not treated as respectable human beings. They are subjects to physical, mental, emotional and psychological violence.*

Key Words: *Commodification, Objectification, Social Constructionism, Traditional Hierarchies, Violence*

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Introduction

An unfair society constantly nurtures some significant inequities through its unfair systems. In particular, remote regions of Pakistan are raised on patriarchal constructions where male members are decision makers and considered ultimate authority. In a patriarchal society, the role of men and women is clearly defined where men exude dominance and superiority over female members on the basis of race and sex. *Kala Meda Bhes (Black is my Robe)* and *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)*, both present some main social issues related to the status and trafficking of women, social setups and false religious beliefs.

Kala Meda Bhais (Black is my Robe) is set in the remote and deserted area of Pakistan named the Cholistan, where on the one hand, resources are limited to that much extent that people scarcely maintain morality and are manipulated by the fake *pir* of the village who is a deciding force of the lives of the people in the name of religion and on the other side of the string, a woman's worth is equal to a productive animal. Similarly, the other play *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)* highlights the plight of women at its worst. Bangladeshi

women are trafficked to Pakistan, where they are used as sex workers and maids experiencing abusive language, physical, mental and sexual abuse, and forced prostitution.

Literature Review

According to Fernando, "A commodity is a basic good used in commerce that is interchangeable with other goods of the same type" (*Investopedia*). This definition refers to the valuable and useful articles that can be sold, purchased and exchanged. The post-modern literature deals with the idea of commodification and objectification of females in third world countries.

Rowbotham writes about the mythical constructions that have made women objects and source of reproduction. These constructions pass through generations and support the patriarchy with the idea of male domination and women as exchange commodities (Rowbotham, 1983; Vasquez et al., 2017).

Moreover, Bushra Wajahat writes in her article "Theme of Destitute in Shahid Nadeem's Plays: *Kala Meda Bhais (Black is My Robe)* and *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)*" (2019) that the value of a woman is judged through her being fecund. If she is barren, she is of no worth in

front of the eyes of her husband and society and replaced by another woman or sometimes kept as a maid or an extra piece for the purpose of exploitation. Sundri in *Black is My Robe* is exploited on the same pattern.

The social constructions of patriarchy are also based on this notion that women are inferior biologically, so they are reduced to the roles of sexuality and reproduction. They are shown at the mercy of their husbands economically and rationally. They are portrayed as indecisive, emotional, and impetuous, while men are signified as rational and prudent. (Carlen & Worrall, *Women's Justice? Gender, Crime and Justice*, 1987)

Ambesange Praveen V., in her article "Postcolonialism: Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak," shortly discusses the sufferings of "Subalterns" by naming them as "Third-world Woman" where the question arises "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Praveen V. 1). According to Spivak, women are doubly marginalized, first, by the men of their household, and secondly, by colonizers in Third-world countries. "Subaltern" is a term that means "of lower rank". Spivak, in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" evidently highlights the issues of subalterns in the history and shifting of their voice. In the light of Spivak's concept, it still can be seen in many regions of

Pakistan as well as India; women are treated merely as objects and voiceless entities. The custom of "Satti" and "Kari" is still prevailing unquestioned in most of the regions. In India, women are burnt with their dead husbands in some regions, if they are not burnt they live in "Vidhwa Aashram" and are not accepted by the society. They are deprived of every right that a normal human being should possess.

Nadeem's plays present different female characters taken from Pakistani society. These characters demonstrate the social norms, patriarchal traditions, and stereotypes prevailing in the society as women face more significant challenges in their day to day lives. In one of his plays, *"The Acquittal"*, Jamila is forcefully married to an old man a few years younger than her own father while she is not even fourteen. She is aggressive and speaks out against this cruel social order. Women, before marriage and even after marriage, have no authority and freedom. In scene 8, Jamila says very angrily:

No man can understand what we women have to suffer, what we have to take from men from the time we are born to the time we die. (Angrily) If I had an axe, I would slaughter them one by one. (Her actions indicate murderous intent) I would first strike at the father who

never thought I was as good as his sons and forced me to marry the old man; then I'd strike at my brother who cared only for his honour and never for my happiness. (p 74)

Theoretical Framework

This study analyzes the plays *Kala Meda Bhes (Black is my Robe)* and *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)* by applying the feminist perspective of commodification and sexual objectification, given by Lucy Irigaray in her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985). Irigaray starts the article "Women in Market with the statement, "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (170). This gives the idea that women are commodities and keep an exchanged value. "Why exchange women? Because they are "scarce [commodities] . . . essential to the life of the group" (170). She further adds, "Are men all equally desirable? Do women have no tendency toward polygamy? The good anthropologist does not raise such questions. A fortiori: why are men not objects of exchange among women? It is because women's bodies, through their use, consumption, and circulation, provide for making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown "infrastructure" of the elaboration of that social life and culture". Irigaray

explains the idea of commodification that all the "production work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are a man's business." (171). By selling, purchasing, and exchanging women among themselves, from one group of men to the other, they strengthen one another and keep the workforce within themselves. Our society runs on the wishes, needs and desires of women, "in which man begets man as his own likeness, wives, daughters, and sisters have to value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men (171-172). Irigaray analyses women's status through Marxism that men exploit women to keep their monopoly over them and society. They are "producer-subjects" who control the value and worth of women and exchange them; thus, women are "commodity-objects" lowered to an inactive role in the exchange process (175).

"As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value. They manifest themselves therefore as commodities or have the form of commodities, only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form" (175). Women as commodities differ from one another in value just like different objects differ in their value and usefulness, for example, women as

mothers do not have any exchange value, “mothers, reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange” (185). Their circulation would destroy the social order while, a “virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value” (186), because “she does not exist: she is a simple envelope” is an “envelope”, once used by men would enter into a natural order. A prostitute’s body has the use and value, “Prostitution amounts to usage that is exchanged. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The body of the prostitute is valuable because it has already been used. The more it has served, the more it is of worth”. The nature of the female body has been “used up”, and she is no more than an object for men” (186).

Results and Discussions

Textual Analysis

The play *Kala Meda Bhes* (*Black is My Robe*) depicts the story of a small village known as the Cholistan. Sundri is the protagonist and most important character of the play, which is degraded from her status as a woman in the true sense of the word. She lives with her husband named Wasaya, who desires to have a child. Unable to give birth to a child, she has to bear the burden of her

husband’s second marriage and suffer at the hands of the second wife.

The death of Wasaya’s ox proves bitter and miserable for the family because it leaves them on the verge of hunger. On the day, Wasaya’s ox dies, another villager named Ditta mourns over the death of his wife, leaving behind four children motherless and helpless. One household is without ox, the other is without a wife and mother for the children. Now that Ditta has two oxen but no wife, and Wasaya has two wives but no ox, Wasaya exchanges his ‘spare’ wife Sundri with an ox of Ditta.

MAASI: Look. Ditta needs a woman badly and you need an ox equally bad. If you let go off one wife and give her to Ditta, he will be too happy to exchange her with his ox.

SOHNI: How dare you Maasi?

MAASI: Keep quiet. I am not talking about you. Look, Wasaya. You will get an ox to carry water and do other chores, and Ditta will get a wife to look after his house. Do you understand now?

SOHNI: What a nice idea! We will get an ox and poor Ditta will get a wife.

WASAYA: What are you saying, Maasi? How can this happen?

MAASI: Why not? This is how things are done. You get what you need and exchange it what the other party needs. Sundri is the price for the ox. You don't need Sundri and Ditta doesn't the ox. It is as simple as that. (Nadeem 168)

This is the peak of the most mortifying and humiliating type of barter system. Sundri is infertile and such a woman is considered to be dysfunctional, fruitless and is a reduced form of a female.

In those developing societies, which are rigidly sex stratified and patriarchal and patrilineal, a secure basis for women's power is derived from their ability to have children, especially sons. In fact, reproduction is the only power bases that women in all social classes and marital relationships can more or less control. Hence, they have no motivation to limit the number of children they bear until they have at least two or three sons to consolidate their position in the household (Caldwell, 1976; Okonjo, 119-120).

Productivity is a fundamental, vital act and capability on a woman's part. There are certain factors that affect women's status in the family and society and put them in the position of authority, such as age, bringing large dowry, and giving birth to a male child. Unfortunately, Sundri does not possess any of these.

Sundri is as important as an ox for carrying water to meet Wasaya's both ends. "But the death of an ox is as tragic as that of a wife" (Nadeem 161). Ox is productive as it helps Wasaya do his business but Sundri is not fecund. She is unable to give birth to Wasaya's son.

"WASAYA: But let me talk to Sundri first.

MAASI: Why, who ever asks a woman's consent?" (Nadeem 169).

No one asks for a woman's consent and she is bound to do whatever she is asked to do. No one asks for her opinion. The word "ever" shows that it is a tradition and a historical phenomenon as at another point, she complains to be treated as worthless:

"WASAYA: "Sundri, it is very bad. Don't break her heart" (Nadeem 164).

SUNDRI: "And what about my heart? Haven't you broken it into pieces? You are disgusting. Even poor Ditta is better than you. Look how he is mourning his dead wife. But you are trying to kill your living wife". (Nadeem 164)

This is an apt example of the commodification of women. They are left with no choice other than to lament. Wasaya always supports his second wife, Sohni, because she has brought an ox and a lot of other

things in her dowry. On a materialistic basis, she is falling on the scale devised by her husband to measure the quality and attributes of a woman. Sohni is treated like a queen by her husband and she is the real woman that Wasaya wanted, but there are always two sides to a picture. Wasaya loves and cares for her because she is the one who would be bringing prosperity, health, wealth and most importantly, a son who would make a lineage and share his burden. It is evident that when Sohni dishes out the food for her husband, he starts shouting. He calls that food “rotten food” and wails over his fate (Nadeem 167). When he complains about his collapsing business, Sohni says that it is all because of Sundri, but instead of taking the side of Sohni, he admonishes her for not giving him a child (Nadeem 167). Sohni is not loved; Wasaya pretends to love and respect her because he has something to obtain from her. It is a matter of personal interests.

Essentialists propose that everything has specific properties, the properties that are essential for things to become what they should be. In the context of Feminism, essentialists say that there are specific properties that a woman should have for becoming a woman in a true sense. Essentialism closely relates to “Universalism” that if there are some properties essential for women, then each woman shares common properties to become a

woman (Stone 5). These properties could be biologically and socially constructed. This notion leads to biological essentialism because the properties every woman has in common are biological: a womb, breasts, and child-bearing capacity. This thing further defines women’s confinement into four walls and the domestic sphere. In *Kala Meda Bhes (Black is My Robe)* females are confronted with both biological essentialism and Social-constructivism as Sohni never blames her husband for not having a child. However, she goes with him to the shrine of *pir* to have his blessings so that she could give birth to a child. Sohni always blames Sundri for the death of the ox and being responsible for the declining business of Wasaya because she is the devil in the eyes of Sohni (Nadeem 167). On the other hand, Sundri always says that it is her fate. She suffers because it is written in her fate, not because of the patriarchal society (Nadeem 158).

If *Kala Meda Bhais (Black is My Robe)* depicts the situation of females living in their own country, among their own people, in their own region, then *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)* represents the situation and circumstances of women who are trafficked from their origin, their homeland; Bangladesh to Pakistan. They are subalterns worthy of all types of ill-treatment. As Sundri is commodified while living in the four

walls with her husband, similarly, women in *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)* are objectified by the pimps and agents seeking money. They are beaten up, dehumanized and degraded to make them realize that they are of no value.

Dukhini (Woman of sorrow) is based on the injustice and atrocities at the time of partition of Bangladesh in 1971. Trafficking of women is at the heart of this play. The central figure in the play is Dukhini, who is trafficked in Pakistan after the separation of Bangladesh in 1971. She sets herself on fire and dies. She prefers death over dishonour. After her death, she is buried in Pakistan as "amanat" (Nadeem 196). She is neither accepted by Pakistani officials nor by Bangladeshi officials. Moreover, she is unnamed. No one knows her name. No one even attends her funeral prayer. She lacks identity. She has no individuality, no position, and status. She is only described in terms of her relations to the men in her life. Before marriage, her father's name was her identity and after marriage, she is known by her husband's name. She is also a daughter, a wife, sister, and daughter-in-law, yet she has no identity (Nadeem 196). Ambiya, Moeena and Fatima are all victimized. They come to the grave of Dukhini and share their stories.

AMBIYA: My name is Ambiya. I was brought from Bangladesh to Lahore four years ago. I have suffered a lot. The man I was married to already had a wife and a child. He is ill. I gave him sleeping pills before coming here.

MOEENA: I am Moeena. The elder master and his sons are out. I have come without permission.

FATIMA: I am Fatima. That bastard Bachoo, the pimp, locked me in and has gone looking for customers. I have come by jumping the wall. (Nadeem 197)

These women share similar situations. They are not allowed to leave home. Ambiya is the youngest among her siblings. Sick of poverty and the burden of marriages of her elder sisters, her father sells her to a foreign man by receiving a handsome amount of money. She is married to a man who is already married and strict enough that she cannot even breathe in his presence. Fatima is stalled with other girls as different objects and commodities are displayed in front of the buyers.

FATIMA: Bangalipara! That Butcher House, that Auction Market! That is where they took me too, to be sold to the highest bidder.

AMBIYA AND MOEENA: You were also sold at the Bangalipara?

FATIMA: Yes. I was sold like a slave, like an animal. We were fifteen girls in one room and they were parading us in front of the buyers. (Nadeem 200)

All these girls are auctioned at the auction market, where they are made to sit in a line and the customers examine them like an item or animal.

AGENT 1: The girls are all healthy, with strong limbs, have no illness. Almost all are virgins. I have taken great care to protect their virginity.

CUSTOMER 1: But how can you guarantee that? There is usually breakage in such a long journey.

AGENT 1: If there are damaged goods, I declare that. You can trust me. There is a concession for damaged goods. If you want second hand stuff, come to the other room.

AGENT 1: The goods are brand new. What kind of goods are you looking for, sir?

CUSTOMER 2: I need a maidservant. She should be able to cook and take care of the children. But it will be good if she is pretty as well. You understand?

AGENT 2: Yes, I do, sir. The beauty of Bengal is famous all over the world. I will show you a piece, which will be beautiful and servile.

She will cook good food, sing beautiful songs. It will be wife and singing girl combined, two in one.

CUSTOMER 2: What I need is an obedient servant.

AGENT 2: They all are obedient and servile, sir. We will give you a piece you will love. Have a look. (Nadeem 200)

The opening pages of the story describe that Bangladeshi women are trafficked in Pakistan and they are sold like animals and objects. “Damaged goods”, “brand new goods”, “second-hand stuff” are the words used for women at the border for the purpose of selling them. Same as rotten fruits and second-hand brands are sold at a lower rate; women who are married or have lost their virginity due to some maltreatment are sold at a lower rate. Every Bangladeshi woman in Pakistan is treated as an object and commodity. They are merely showpieces and sex objects for men to quench their thirst through their bodies along with the benefits they get from them by keeping them as domestic servants.

Fatima is dehumanized, humiliated and subjugated by her agent, who keeps reminding her that her only job is to serve men for gaining money in return (Nadeem 202). Furthermore, she is degraded by the pimp in every possible way. He

abuses her and her family by calling them shameless because they have sold her for a few pennies. The pimp keeps all the money she earns and even then accuses her of stealing his money just to give her pain and make her buried under the burden of debt so that he could use her more for his own benefit. She is a living dead now without emotions, desires, feelings, and dreams.

Mai is another significant female character in the play *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)*. She also is a victim of this unjust society. Her humiliation, subjugation, and objectification are the aftermath of the partition of the sub-continent. Her daughter sacrifices her life due to the violence-mongers. She could not do anything to save her because her cries could have been a great danger for others (Nadeem 207). At the time of partition of the sub-continent, when all the men of Mai's group die in a quarrel, most of the women, for saving their honour, move towards the well, but unfortunately, Mai could not reach the well and is caught by the enemies. They rape her and use her heartlessly. She becomes a toy for everyone to play with, and after the great struggle, she successfully crosses the border and comes to Pakistan. In Pakistan, she reaches her husband, but he refuses to accept her. "I learnt that my husband had also managed to reach Pakistan. I went to

him but he refused to take me back. He said I had become impure and could not stay in a respectable family" (209). She becomes exhausted, suffocated, disappointed and desperate to such an extent that she starts disliking the living souls and becomes the friend of the dead ones (Nadeem 209). She shares the grief of dead ones and living dead. She is called the "protector of the dead". She always takes care of the graves because she has tested the love and care of the living ones.

Conclusions

The study concludes that women are entities for exchange with a trade value in both the plays under analysis. The circumstances due to which women are experiencing ill-treatment from men are poverty, poor governance, societal norms, traditions, and historical events. Sundri in *Kala Meda Bhes (Black is My Robe)* has been commodified by her husband as she is his possession, just as it happens in a master-slave relationship. A woman's worth is recognized only if she is fecund in patriarchy. For Wasaya, Sundri is useless. He trades her for a better option, an ox. He treats her as an object without considering her feelings and emotions. In the play, *Dukhini (Woman of Sorrow)*, Dukhini, Fatima, Ambiya, Moeena and Mai are sexually objectified.

They are trafficked and traded either in the name of marriage or for economic prosperity. They are commodified by their fathers, husbands and agents who sell them and use them as a body. None of the female characters in both the plays are allowed to think and complain against all the injustices done to them, "they function as components of private property, or as commodities" (Irigaray191).

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