

UNVEILING THE MIND: A JOURNEY TOWARDS BECOMING A BEING**SHRUTI JAIN**PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages
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ABSTRACT: *This paper charts the brave journey of Safia, a Muslim woman who endeavours to demolish all the stifling boundaries and injunctions which bind women in order to bring them together and develop a sense of unity among them that they can fight together and build a world of 'beings', free from prejudices. Safia is the protagonist of Noor Zaheer's My God is a Woman and the later being an active researcher and social worker is aware of women's marginal existence in this contemporary cant and hypocritical male dominated world. Zaheer through her work is speaking out for women. I have attempted to graph how the novel brings into light the fact that irrespective of religion, caste and class women meet resistance and resentment yet the perception of reality which is formed by experience, that is by space and education marks the difference in their approach. Safia's private space is though overtaken by patriarchy for some time, she does not submit to its dictates forever. The moment Safia comes in contact with the catalyst Abbas, the layer of dominance over her is shattered and her mind is unveiled. The notion of equality which always existed as a mental state now starts occupying the external space too. Education brings awareness and awareness in turn awakens the desire to know. Thus the heightened consciousness of gender being a mere constructed captive constraint, the knowledge of the common condition and strength of will together make Safia not only liberate herself from the stifling cage of patriarchy but also give voice to silence born of oppression, hardships and domination.*

KEY WORDS: *Purdah, Comprehensive understanding, Unveiling, Journey, Growing sovereignty, Assertion of 'being', Liberating others, New dimensions.*

INTRODUCTION

The God in every religion, whether Islam, Sikhism, Christianity or Zoroastrian is always, without question, a male. Even in Hindu culture where woman is considered to be a goddess, the three 'primary' Gods, the creator, the preserver, the destroyer are men. Though a woman gives birth yet God is undoubtedly supposed to be a man. But Noor Zaheer in *My God is a Woman* (2008) denies accepting this male God since he is biased; he is not doing anything to stop his male employers from misusing the divine authority and power. She claims her God to be a woman who unlike man is generous and magnanimous enough to let both the sexes lie in equality and harmony: 'wo-man'. However, being generous does not mean that she is weak or

coward who can not defend herself against the unjust tortures of patriarchy. She can fight back and her protagonist Safia is one such woman who really fights back.

STUDY

In a Muslim society where private space of a girl is overtaken by patriarchy, Safia never lets the social commands of how a woman should behave get internalized within her. She not only asserts her being and fights for herself but also for other woman like Shah Bano. She bravely supports Shah Bano in her struggle for justice. Noor Zaheer in the Preface to *My God is a Woman* writes:

This book has been written exactly twenty- one years after the introduction of the Bill for the Protection of Muslim Women. More than two decades after the Supreme Court's historic judgment of granting maintenance to a Muslim woman, Shah Bano. The manner in which decision of the apex judicial body had been quashed had provoked many progressive women to question various organizations concerned with women. The answer they received had been the same- it is up to the Muslims to make any changes in their laws. Twenty- one years we have waited for an initiative from a democratic set up, which professes equality for all its citizens, towards giving a section of women the right to live with dignity. Had it been taken, this book would have become unnecessary.

Shah Bano was a Muslim woman who after sacrificing her individual self in the marriage and spending almost four decades with her husband was mercilessly thrown out of his home. Initially, she had been paid maintenance of two hundred rupees per month by her husband as compensation for the emotional fracture she went through. Though money could not heal her wound yet for fulfilling the basic necessity of life it was a small solace. But her successful advocate husband earning approximately five thousand rupees per month could not even provide her with this meager amount for more than two years and so the matter went to the Bhopal High Court. The court ordered the husband to pay even less, that is, just Rupees one hundred and seventy nine and twenty paise per month to her elderly dependent wife. Yet instead of accepting the decision of the court the husband instantly said the word *talaaq*⁶ thrice to his wife to resolve the matter. He divorced the woman who shared his bed, reared his five children and silently beard all his tortures just to escape paying her Rupees one hundred and seventy nine and twenty paise per month. However, this time gathering all her courage, Shah Bano approached the Supreme Court under the Section 125 of Criminal Procedure Code which is there for the protection of women of all religion and grants equality irrespective of caste, creed, and community. The Supreme Court defended the decision of the High Court. The husband in turn

⁶ Divorce

guarded himself on the argument that *mahr*⁷ and the maintenance of the *idat*⁸ period has been paid.

The matter caught fire thus forcing the Supreme Court to rethink and consider the issue of *mata*, in the Holy *Quran*, Chapter II, Sura 241, contending that Muslim law lets a divorced Muslim woman economically depend on her husband even after the *idat* period. The court after much study concluded that Chapter II, Sura 241 of the Holy *Quran* leaves no doubt that a Muslim husband is under obligation of making provision for maintenance of the divorced wife. Finally, a judgment was passed that a Muslim divorced woman who is economically independent will get the *mahr* and the maintenance during the *idat* period but women like Shah Bano who can not look after themselves will even get maintenance though not exceeding Rupees five hundred per month. But Safia is right in her observation: “The simple issue whether a woman is entitled to a paltry sum of Rs 500 as maintenance under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code or as a Muslim woman she gets nothing, has emerged as ‘Muslim vs the Rest’ issue” (293). Muslims made a great uproar; the decision of Supreme Court was not acceptable to the Muslims politicians and clergy. Their age old fear that accepting a common law will lead to the imposition of Hindu hegemony revived. They questioned “[...] the Supreme Court’s right to interpret the Muslim Personal Law and term it as interference” (294). They further claimed that no one else apart from a Maulvi is qualified enough to interpret the Quran, not even a Supreme Court judge. Thereby, a simple matter became a religious issue. Eventually on one hand, as reported in Safia’s Journal Shah Bano was forced to give “[...] her thumb impression on a typed statement written by *Maulvis* of Deobandh and Barelwi Schools withdrawing her petition and refusing to accept the judgment of the Supreme Court. The cyclostyled bit of paper was titled “*Zameer Ki Awaaz*”” (295). The irony is that so many Maulvis who themselves did not have the heart to provide just food and shelter to an ill old lady tried to awaken other’s soul. They do not even know the meaning of humanity yet claim to be its protector. Can for any God, interpretation of his religion be more important than saving the life of a human being? On the other hand, the Parliament cancelled the decision of the Supreme Court solely for the fear of losing Muslim support in elections and safeguarding their votes. They very sensibly passed a ‘Bill for the Protection of Muslim Women’ according to which a reasonable, fair provision and maintenance will be paid to the divorced woman, itself within the *idat* period by her former husband and after that the relatives who will inherit her property on her death will take care of her and in case no such relative is there, she will paid maintenance by State Wakf Board, that is, as Safia says the bill

⁷ Alimony. In Muslim culture alimony is fixed at the time of marriage itself as for them marriage is a mere contract and not a bond arranged in heaven.

⁸ Period between pronouncement and formalization of divorce.

“[...] gives that divorced woman a choice between prostitution if she is young and beggary if she is old” (295).

Shah Bano just asked for the fulfillment of the basic needs of survival and not even a single ‘man’ could provide her with that. She did not get justice in this world which is both created and protected by ‘men’; instead they made her life worse. Every one of them blowed up the matter for their own selfish motives but none could provide her with mere food. So this book is necessary, as it speaks for hundreds of Shah Banos, tries to bring them in light so that their problem can be addressed and attempts to awaken men’s soul to the dire consequences their brutal acts are resulting in. This novel through Safia strives to help women break the fetters of subjugation and enlighten them to the fact that they have a lot of spark and courage in them to emerge as triumphant beings.

Safia is a Muslim girl who is born with a slacking grip of Urizen on Orc. Urizen and Orc are the two characters of William Blake’s mythology created to explain the fallen state of England at his time. The explanation he offered for England which is described in *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*⁹, is synonymous to that of the degraded state of women all over the world. Orc represents the spirit of revolution man is born with whereas Urizen is the false God who is the personification of reason, repression and authority. This false God creates ‘nets’ of religion and conventions with which he keeps people down, restrains their yearning for freedom and justice and suppresses their desires. Orc is chained by him in this world. Women’s Orc is also shackled by the patriarchy (Urizen) which works with the support of religion.

Safia’s Orc had started freeing itself from the menacing manacles of Urizen from the age of nine by making her commit an unconventional act of creating contact with the outside world through writing a story for *Ghuncha*, a children’s magazine. The story got published and she received a note of encouragement from the editor of the magazine. But this acknowledgement from an unknown man made her grandfather pass an order of purdah which in turn curbed the spirits of an enthusiastic girl.

The Muslim society women has always kept in *purdah* believing that it is a protection against the unwanted attention from unknown men thereby keeping them safe from sexual harassment. However, as Jasbir Jain expounds in *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*, the irony is that this purdah between men and women gradually becomes a device to segregate them and ensure the continuation of the subordinated role assigned to women as it confines the entire world of women to *aangan* or courtyard. In the guise of protecting women from the dangers of the outside world, the purdah serves as a cover to prevent the light of

⁹ Sengupta, Debjani and Shernaz Cama, comps. and eds. *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Delhi: Worldview, 2004. 41-53.

enlightenment and learning from entering into their mind. It secludes women from the experience which is derived through the exposure to the outside world. Safia in seventeen years has just traveled twice in train. One becomes independent through experience but a Muslim girl is never allowed to have that, instead she is 'educated' in the Holy Scriptures which advice her to be docile and curb desires and also grooms her to be given in contract.

In Islam, marriage is not believed to be arranged in heaven but is a mere contract and a contract always involves transaction of money. So being the daughter of a rich and reputed family who is also perfect in "[...] her knowledge and understanding of Holy Scriptures [...]" (2), Safia is married to Abbas, son of the High Court judge, Justice Saheb. If the bride brought eleven seers and many jewels as dowry, the *mahr* decided was no less. However, Abbas does not believe in these 'traditions and customs'. He dreams of a liberated India where woman enjoy equal rights and status as men. He has written a book called Fireworks which is banned in every respectable Muslim family and is labeled to be a 'lost soul' because the person who goes against fundamentalism to champion equality of caste, creed and gender is believed to be out of senses. But Safia's father, Mirza Saheb is confident enough that his daughter will bring back this lost soul "back to the true faith – Islam" (2). Nevertheless, future holds something else. Abbas gets highly impressed by Safia's awareness, though incomplete about the current political upheaval of Ali brothers under house arrest as according to him: "Awareness is not punishable, it is ignorance which is a crime" (5). He is further elated at the fact that Safia is 'a matric'. His joy calms Safia who after expressing her knowledge thought that she has made him upset: "After all, he had been educated in England

and who wants a Miss Know-It-All for a wife" (5). But respite was for a short time as the moment Safia steps in her in-laws house, Safdar Manzil; an 'unending cold war' begins with her mother-in-law, Zeenat Begam who is also addressed as Lady Sahib. Zeenat Begum gets annoyed because Safia accepts her husband's decision of not wearing purdah: "It was [...] a moment that marked the beginning of an unending cold war with Zeenat Begum" (8). Purdah, the tool to keep low the spirits of independence in Safia was snatched away from Zeenat Begum. Safia chose to deny the shallowness of traditionality by breaking the wall between the woman and the world. Thus "It was a moment of negation, of all that had been systematically inculcated in her. It was a moment of shame. Shame as has been defined for women by men for centuries. It was also a moment of decision, to remain with yesterday or reach out towards the tomorrow. [...] It was a moment that sealed her bond with Abbas" (7-8).

Zeenat Begum exemplifies women who are a part of patriarchy and help perpetuating the oppression of women. Zaheer's following words aptly describes her:

The Indian woman was in a similar situation. Humiliation, abuse and torture was heaped on her. Silently, not even daring to question the right of her tormentors, she accepted this treatment, carefully collecting and chronologically cataloging each one of them, waiting

tirelessly to hand them over as a family heirlooms to the women of the next generation. Each generation tortured the next, who bided their time, waiting for the pleasure of torturing their successor. (10-11)

Zeenat Begum has herself undergone the humiliation and torture of sharing her husband with another woman: “Between her and Justice Saheb was an unwritten deal. Do not bring another woman to the house and I shall not interfere with that you do outside” (25), yet she is totally unperturbed while ‘buying’ women slaves. Though a woman, she has no guilt in treating other women as commodities. She bought three girls, “Two for rupees seventy each and the third, because she was fair, with long black hair and almond shaped eyes, came for a hundred” (18). Safia is horrified at this act as she could read “[...] the dead eyes of the girls, the total lack of expression which spoke not of subjugation, hunger or pain, but just of nothingness” (15). She informs about it to Abbas: “Do you know what is Bubu doing? She is buying some slaves” (15). Safia’s reaction to this episode shows that she has the potential to soar into the endless sky of strength and freedom. But she is powerless as she lacks proper education and also the limitations imposed on her inhibit her. To do something she must first eliminate these hurdles. Abbas helps her to do so.

When Abbas is arrested, he and Safia instead of wasting their time in lamentation, uses the circumstances cleverly to achieve their goal of freedom. Justice Saheb is having an affair with Sylvia Robinson, an Anglo-Indian girl who is actually ‘gifted’ to him like a plaything by Lord Sheldon in order to compensate the arrest of Abbas. Though Justice Saheb does not violate the tenet of Islam which forbids a Muslim to marry a Non-Muslim, his growing love becomes too passionate and open that it causes trouble for Zeenat Begum. She for the fear of losing her position tries to put an end to their relation. But Sylvia being intelligent soon senses Zeenat Begum’s intentions and advises Justice Saheb to continue his practice in Allahabad High Court. Justice Saheb agrees and Abbas in turn takes the full advantage of this situation by cleverly sowing the seeds of doubt in Zeenat Begum’s mind when she goes to meet him in jail:

“Bubu, you have got to understand,” the urgency in Abbas’ voice quietened Lady Sahib’s angry burst. Baba does not want you in Allahabad. He has other plans. Most probably, he wants that woman to keep house for him. Don’t try to keep up pretences. Lucknow is abuzz with rumors so thick that even jail walls cannot stop them. You cannot leave Lucknow and the Estate. You need Safia at this moment. Suggest to Baba that Safia should go with him. She is alone, she is educated and can take care of things. (32)

Safia, on the other hand “yearning to begin organized education” (33), tactfully convinces Justice Saheb to take her along: “No Baba, no need to get down. I have only one thing to say. My presence in Allahabad will not hamper you in anyway and will considerably decrease the number of Bubu’s visits. I shall never be a spy for her but I might be your much needed shield” (33).

In Allahabad Safia get the chance to satisfy her thirst of knowledge and exposure. Doctor Zahida is the first person who helps Safia to make her initial move towards mental freedom. Safia starts admiring her, she is the “[...] first Muslim woman doctor, who wore her Leucoderma patches with nonchalance, even arrogance” (35). Zahida offers Safia her first smoke and soon Safia begins to smoke openly. Safia’s daring act of smoking openly in public is a metaphor of woman exercising her choice and rejecting the traditional segregation of the sexes and their activities.

Allahabad University gives Safia a room for her energies. The enthusiastic spirits which were curbed by the order of purdah are revived. If on one hand, she excitedly works for National Seminar of the Progressive writers, on the other, encounters Sadaqat Rehmani who believes that: “Women do not possess the capacity to channelize education to proper use” (38). She makes it clear to him that women always had the capacity to channelize but education itself was denied to them. She further claims that today “times are changing” (40) and women have a motive to live for. In Safia’s case its Abbas who makes her discover her motive, her cause. She says: “Today I live for that cause and I love Abbas all the more for giving me a cause to live for. Oh yes, Abbas is still very important to me but what is meaningful is my cause” (44) and that is, to achieve equality and liberty.

Education empowers Safia to fulfill this cause and face life with confidence. So, after completing graduation she joins Sajeda Hussain Muslim Girls School which gives her an opportunity to do something for the welfare of the girls. She meets a girl, Nigar whose marriage is fixed against her wishes to a man of her father’s age. On listening Nigar’s tragic tale, both Safia and Abbas decide to help her through the tenets of their religion: “Islam gives women some rights. Those rights are few and there is a lot of noise about having granted them. Still, they are there [...] Make use of these rights [...]” (61). Nigar in order to express her denial, remains silent when Maulvi enquires her decision about being married to the old man in order to proclaim them husband and wife. But Maulvi being experienced shakes his head and says “[...] it happens as a part of decorum and good upbringing. It was only dignified that the girl did not show that she was in a hurry to be married. Repeated again, the question again met with silence. The Maulvi coughed. This was the third and the last time. The question was again followed by a stony silence in which an angry voice repeated, ‘Say yes you wretched girl’” (64). Hearing this statement Nigar in a firm voice says: “[...] No, the proposal is not acceptable to me” (64). However even after Nigar’s clear decision when Maulvi asks the ladies of the family to persuade her, Safia fiercely objects: “It is her right, the holy book says so” (64) thus exposing the reality that many times Maulvis in the name of religion suppress women. They don’t have the holiness and divinity of God. One of these Maulvis even gets a tight slap from Safia on eyeing the young girls of her school. He tries to defend himself by saying that being the man who represents God, ‘it is his duty to keep eye on everyone’ but is left dumbstruck by Safia’s blow.

With each passing day, Safia gets more poignantly concern with the urgent feminine issues. Her soul intensely feels the tortures and atrocities women are subjected to in the male chauvinistic

society. She deeply desires to demolish the religion and culture barriers superimposed upon women and for that she is even ready to go against her own people.

Ladli, the girl whom Zeenat Begum purchased from a holy man for Rupees Hundred gets pregnant with the child of Syed Wali Jafri, Begum's elder son. She further commits the 'crime' of openly claiming the child to be Syed Wali Jafri's and therefore as punishment is not only brutally beaten but is made to run naked: "It was Ladli but she was stark naked. Safia closed her eyes in disbelief. When she opened them, she saw a hand stretching itself towards her. Quickly she tied her hair into a knot" (82). Safia raises her voice against this barbarity and saves Ladli from further humiliation regardless of the dire results that she might be forced to encounter because of it.

When the orders of Abbas's execution are passed, Safia's father once again tries to assert his authority on her. He was the one who married Safia to Abbas but today in order to save his own reputation, wants Safia to seek divorce as if a woman neither has the right to choose nor to end a relationship: "What do you mean 'your consent'? You are my daughter, you would not wish to live with a non-believer. Anyway, in case of talaq a woman's father or brother take the decision. Your consent or dis-sent is not required" (101). But Safia rejects to be a pawn anymore and declares: "Abba, I am not leaving Abbas, nor this country" (101). She states that "In your household I was only a woman, now I am a person" (101). Safia has shed her timidity and shuns abject surrender to the protective cover provided by men.

Abbas is finally executed for his liberal thinking and acts. No one apart from Safia stood by him in his last days, not even his party for which he gave up everything. Infact they went against him because they also like the society they were fighting against, did not believe in women's freedom: "You took upon yourself to be openly critical of *Sharirat*. Not merely criticize it, you make it clear in the book of yours that it is these laws that are responsible for the sorry state of Muslim women in the country" (148).

Abbas dies a death of a martyr, fighting for a great cause and Safia does not belittle it by crying. She does not let the struggle started by her and Abbas go in vain but takes it to much greater heights and her first individual battle is fought against Zeenat Begum. She does not spare her mother-in-law when the latter decides to throw her out of Safdar Manzil after Abbas's death. Safia registers a case against her. But eventually, Safia loses the case because the Court decides not to interfere with Muslim Personal Law. Yet she is not a loser because she does not lose her hope and with her daughter Sitara moves to Delhi, a 'bigger' city than Lucknow, the national capital, finally freeing herself from the cage of patriarchy. However, the struggle does not end here. Safia is not satisfied by only achieving her individuality and thus starts awakening other women to their own plight. She forces these women to come together and collectively wage war against patriarchy on the basis of commonality of their experience.

In Delhi Safia starts working under Amrita who runs a drama troupe. Initially, Amrita appears to be an independent woman who is bold and tough: “Amrita was known as the dragon amongst her artistes” (163) but Safia gradually senses that these attributes are just used as a garb to conceal her truth. Amrita says to Safia: “I shall be Mrs Govind Ram to you and you shall be Saidani Bibi for all the troupe and the workers. But in private we shall call each other by or names, not the names of our clans, caste or husband” (162-163). This shows that though economic independence has earned Amrita a position in society yet she lacks the guts to lift up the restrictions posed by that society. She can neither talk about the personal traumas and tribulations that she faces in her married life bereft of emotional bonding nor can satisfy her desires.

A marriage of convenience which is still a thriving system in our society has been a bitter experience for Amrita. As a family’s hope lay solely in the beauty of their daughter if she is to be married to a prosperous groom, Amrita without her consent is given to a rich boy who fell deeply in love with ‘her beauty’. Govind Ram was so enamored by her beauty that he “[...] refused to eat and drink until Amrita was promised to him” (167). Though Govind Ram claims to have married Amrita out of love, the latter’s experience of sexual intercourse always have a strange quality of violence attached to it, which in today’s legal term is defined as marital rape:

He arrived with red high-heeled sandals for her and made her parade naked, wearing only the sandals. He never wanted to waste energy in giving her pleasure and entered her only at the very last minute, squealing like an overfed pig being led to the butchery. Sometimes he came while sitting on a chair and jumped in rhythm with the jerks of the ejection. Her breasts ached as he sucked and bit them, pinching her naked buttocks, pushing his thumb inside her arm and rubbing his pennies on her thigh to hurry up his own climax. Two years of this and she decided to talk to him. The blow had been so hard that she had rolled off the bed, hitting her head on the floor. (168-169)

The man who was after her beauty could not digest the brain that lie beneath it: “Don’t dare talk like this. It is not for the woman to question her master’s desires and how he quenches them. Don’t you ever discuss these dirty things again!” (169). Zaheer points out: “The epics are full of men marrying more than one woman, making overtures to married women, kidnapping and forcing them to co-habit with them. But when a woman dares to profess love to a man, she must be taught a lesson” (181). Women have always been a victim of men’s lust. Kamala Das by voicing the silent acceptance of Radha in ‘The Maggots’ makes us realize the searing pain the later goes through when Krishna kisses her. His kisses bother her yet she does not complain:

That night in her husband arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is

It is to the corpse if the maggots nip? (21)

Women in deference to the social mores have never raised their voice against the barbarity and thus Zaheer is right in saying for women that “One never does. One only learns to ignore, to overlook and to numb one’s senses” (169). However, Amrita is not numb only because of the fear of the society but also because of her daughter Geetika. Geetika “[...] is a total spastic. Her mortar nerves do not function but her brain is alive and sensitive” (199). Amrita tells Safia that Geetika:

[...] loves me and I love her and we are a world together. She gets fits of fear and no one can control her but me. The man hates her and does not want any children from me. Not while she is alive. Recently, he has discovered that he can get her to have a fit if he bits me in her presence. Nothing he can ever do to me will ever bring me to my knees, but when he threatens to kill her, I am afraid. She is so helpless; can’t move, can’t scream. I am frightened into submission. (199)

Fearing of losing Geetika has prompted her to adhere to the cruelty of Govind Ram by deadening that part of her nature that would resist it. Amrita submits for her child.

Safia instigates Amrita to make her realize that Geetika does not get feats out of fear, instead they are the projection of her rebellion: “It is obvious that she wants to protect you. I don’t know anything about her brain or her nerves but her heart is in the right place. It does not tolerate injustice” (199).

The cause of the void in Amrita’s life is her inability to openly accept the truth of Geetika. She suffers in isolation for the fear of being the only woman with such problem and hence, commits the same mistake as the American women of Betty Friedan’s time did⁵. By imprisoning her feeling she is never able to attain an emotional fulfillment and thus tries to seek solace in Kendra. It acts as an escape like the ‘dream work’ of Sigmund Freud. Freud in his “The Theory of Dreams” explains that a person in waking life is burdened by many unconscious desires which he can not express or fulfill publicly because of the fear of the super-ego. The Super-ego is the conscious part of the mind which is the symbol of internalized social, cultural and religious restrictions. While sleeping the conscious mind also sleeps, giving way to the unconscious to fulfill its repressed desires through dreams. Through these wish fulfillment dreams the person gets relaxed to an extent.¹⁰

Amrita wants to subvert Govind Ram’s hegemony but unable to do so she gets frustrated and this frustration in the garb of anger and strictness comes out in Kendra and that’s why she is popular by the name of ‘dragon’ amongst her troupe members. The irony is that though Amrita could not

¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund. “The Theory of Dreams”. *Background Prose Readings*. Delhi: Worldview, 2008. 83-88.

understand her secret of wish fulfillment but Govind Ram does thereby using it to manipulate her.

Meanwhile Safia has started to take the name of Kendra overseas. Safia has now a full fledged career of her own. Unhindered by the restraints of Muslim laws and customs she rises as far as her talent permits and her talent knows no bound. She has achieved the equality of standing with men. She brings up her daughter Sitara in an atmosphere which no less than a dream for a Muslim girl. Sitara neither has to experience the feeling of rejection or discrimination nor is required to perform hard domestic labour. She gets proper education and is not burdened with patriarchal ideologies. Safia craves for this 'dream-like' world for every girl. She not only protects her own daughter from male authority but also tries to help other girls like Manaki. Seeing purple bruises on Manaki's arm and face, Safia warns her husband Panna of dire consequences if he does not behave.

Soon Safia because of her hard work attain such heights that she signs custom documents "[...] with the ease of a popular artiste who had given innumerable autographs" (201). From a second train journey to a 'seasoned traveller', Safia has come a long way. Before going overseas for the first time, Amrita questioned: "Why is that we cannot form bonds out of our shame and humiliation, Safia?" (201) and Safia replied that "Because there are no bonds of shame. It is only in pride that bonds are formed" (201). But today, after so many years Safia is happy to know that Amrita has started to comprehend her answer, she has started "[...] learning to treat Geetika as a person and not some unknowingly committed crime that had to be hidden away in the dark corner of some cupboard" (203). Eventually, with time Safia is offered the post of assistant secretary for performing arts by the government:

The plan was to open three national academics for the literature, fine arts and performing arts. They would function as the apex body to oversee the function of the state and district level bodies to promote and preserve the cultural heritage of each region. Decades of erosion and the onslaught of the ridicule that had been heaped on the Indian arts by various conquerors had to be washed away and the true face of Indian culture had to be re-discovered. (206)

Safia eagerly accepts the offer as Abbas "[...] had nurtured similar dreams about the greatness of the united India" (206) and she can also help institutions like Kendra with this job. Safia leaves Kendra against Amrita's wishes with the promise of always being there for her. Amrita wants Safia for her and Geetika but Safia knows out there millions of Amrita and Geetika need her more than them. Gradually, the distance between Safia and Amrita starts increasing and Govind Ram uses it for his own benefit. Time has come to manipulate Amrita. He knows that Amrita will abandon Kendra if she will find fulfillment in her family, that is, if she and Geetika are loved by him and thus for money he starts playing with her emotions. This highlights the fact that in spite of the best efforts to break the age-old net of patriarchy, a modern Indian woman debilitates

their striving because of certain weaknesses and complexes. Govind Ram just has to stretch out his hand for Amrita and she is all there for him. Safia tries to make Amrita aware of this reality but blinded by Govind Ram's fake love she forbids to trust Safia till the time Govind gets his work done and throws her back into the void.

The malpractices of Govind Ram lead to the disintegration of Kendra. After Kendra is closed, Govind Ram confines Amrita to the four walls of his house, thwarting every contact from the outside world. Loss of career and economic independence bring Amrita under full control of Govind Ram. Amrita recalls the unforgettable day of her life:

One day, he was banging my head against the table. I opened my mouth to scream for help, knowing that none would come. Then suddenly I was free. I saw him being thrown on the floor. Geetika tottered for a second before becoming a pile of flesh, bones and cloth on the floor. My baby had stood up. She had defied all the laws of nature and stood up to help me. But he was up and picked up a pillow, and was pressing it down with his foot on my baby's face. I tried to get up but everything went back. It must have been only a few seconds because when it was light again, he was leaving the room and my Geetika....why was she staring at me like that? I crawled to her and took her crumpled form in my arms. "Its okay, Ma is safe, don't worry, don't stare like that, shut your eyes. Sleep....sleep my darling and she, obedient as always, slept a long dreamless sleep forever. (238-239)

The void which Amrita faces this time is much deeper. A mother can bear immense pain for her child but when the same child is snatched away from her, she is hardened and from the idol of endurance and patience turns into an avenging wrath or William Blake's 'Tiger'. Blake's tiger is Orc, spirit of rebellion or as Shernaz Cama in *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*¹¹ says, the wrath which is needed to cleanse and restore the world. The tiger is fierceful yet symmetrical, which suggests that it is terrifying yet has a beauty of its own. He is created in a furnace which symbolizes Los, a character of Blake's mythology. Los in turn represents imagination or spirit of creation. Safia, and Geetika's last gesture of helping Amrita before dying acts as Los who instigates a spirit of rebellion in Amrita to overthrow the authority of Govind Ram and emerge triumphant out of the void. Safia remembers a member of their troupe, Masterji saying: "It is on....the battle is on" (241). The battle between Amrita and Govind Ram begins at the lowest court and finally, after much struggle Amrita wins Kendra back. She shifts from Govind Ram's bungalow to a flat: "But it was hers and she was free" (242). Safia helps her to fight and forge a new and free world for herself.

¹¹ Cama, Shernaz. Foreword. "The Tyger". *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Eds. Debjani Sengupta and Shernaz Cama. Delhi: Worldview, 2004. 78-80.

Sitara has completed her graduation from Miranda college, Delhi University. She then pursues Doctorate, “[...] the happy chirrupy child had become a quite, deep thinking individual” (230). Sitara marries the man of her choice. She and Wasim Zakaria love each other. Wasim is a ‘devotee Muslim man’. Safia remembers: “Sitara had always called her Ma and she liked it because it was the Indian way of addressing. Wasim often pointed out that she should be Ammi as it was the Muslim way” (231). Though Safia tries to convince herself that like her Wasim will also change his rigid Muslim notions, is not confident because “he reject everything that a woman suggested” (231). Soon after marriage, Sitara and Wasim move to Geneva and four years later Safia’s doubt is confirmed, being a man, Wasim could not change his orthodox outlook. Sitara’s inability to conceive reduces her to a secondary status. She is not miffed at the insult hurled at her by her husband but take it on as a norm. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* is correct in reporting that “[...] young women who have benefited from the dramatic struggles and sacrifices of their foremothers decline to use the term feminist to describe themselves” (269). Girls like Sitara who are born free from the vicious clutches of patriarchy do not realize the importance of freedom. As they have neither witnessed oppression nor fought against it, they do not consider it to be an alarming issue. Sitara accepts herself to be deficient and fails to understand that men have always been using this biological lack as a means to smother women. By enduring Wasim’s injustice she not only lets Safia down but also nullifies her fight against the entire world to nurture her daughter as an individual being.

Sitara’s feeble revolt when she discovers that Wasim in her name is “[...] smuggling children for adoption, prostitution, camel racing” (246) projects her to be a portrait of doomed female of modern India. She questions: “How dare you? How could you use me, my sorrow, my shame this way?” (246) but Wasim’s one statement “I am your husband, I have every right to use you” (246) is enough to numb her. Her power of patient endurance, inexhaustible capacity for love and tenderness makes her blind to all the wrongs of Wasim. She fails to understand that efforts are not always one sided, it is only through the spirit of give and take any viable relationship can be established. Finally, in order to escape the punishment of Wasim’s crime, they come back to India.

Safia has been listening about Shah Bano’s case from quite some time now. On hearing the final decision of the Parliament she decided to help Shah Bano. She even encourages Sitara and Amrita to support Bano. Sitara, sensitive and weak denies leaving the protection of Wasim as her master. Howsoever hard Safia tries to make her rise out of the slime like a lotus flower, she is ploughed back into the mire. Amrita, on the other hand, content with her own achievement and freedom, refuses to support Shah Bano because the latter is a Muslim. She fails to realize that she is perpetuating what Govind Ram did, that is, discrimination. For once she does not think that Safia, the woman who helped her leap out of the void is also a Muslim. What if Safia would not have helped her because of the difference in their religion? Safia’s following words are enlightening not only for Amrita but for every woman who thinks like her:

Today you are thinking that all this does not concern you, but soon very soon you shall see that the two halves are two concentric circles and the area where they overlap shares the same light and darkness, the same fates and the same destiny. That region is inhabited by the woman. Don't think this will stop here. Very soon, the Sati shall be revived. Some woman somewhere shall be burnt like rotten wood. People will say that she was a Hindu, just as they say about Shah Bano that she is a Muslim. How wrong they would be. She would really be like all of us – just a woman. (265)

But unfortunately, Amrita and Sitara realize their mistake of not supporting Shah Bano after Safia leaves to carry Bano's struggle forward. Safia had remembered Abbas's advice: "[...] 'Jodi tor daak sune keu na aashe, tobe ekla chalo re'" (271), that is, if nobody answers your call then walk alone. It is a line from the song of Rabindranath Tagore which inspire the listener to strive for justice even if no one is there to support you. Safia had thus mustered courage to go alone and support Shah Bano. Her inner strength flows like a river, overcoming any obstacle it encounters. Jasbir Jain in her essay, "Positioning the 'Post' in Post" says that a river is "[...] the stream of life which flows" (88). Safia is such a 'stream of life' which enkindles every woman it passes by.

When Amrita and Sitara reach to help Safia they come to know from a Maulvi that Safia had expired the day she reached Indore to help Shah Bano. Sitara had questioned Safia before she left for Indore: "Ma, are you trying to revive your battle through Shah Bano?" (257) and Safia had answered: "No. My battle has long been lost. But the war has to go on [...] we have to stand united for justice" (258).

DISCUSSION

Safia has an ardent desire to build a world free from the domination of social codes made by men. Women need to overlook their differences rather share their tribulations, achievements and experiences to outdo male supremacy and empower themselves.

Safia is a rebel who defies the conventions of her time. She dares to exercise her free will and act according to her choice rather than submit meekly to the odds of life. She not only emerges from the state of subjugation and establishes her own identity and self but also kindles an intense desire in other women's heart to achieve individuality. Last but not the least even in her death she stands a complete winner as she dies with a spirit of unfailing optimism.

Jasbir Jain in "Positioning the 'Post' in Post" declares that feminism "[...] is not just the discovery of the self, the exploration of the past, the correction of history, the shaping of epistemological systems which are of significance but also the participation in the present [...]" (91). She further proposes that a woman should shift her "[...] concern with oppression to one with the concept of freedom" (91) and Safia does the same. She 'participates' in the present and tries to demolish all the boundaries to bring together women from all over the country to fight for

their liberty and equality. Her last words are suggestive, thought provoking and argumentative, she asks wouldn't it be: "[...] better for the woman to step forward, wrench the tightly closed fingers open and fling to dust whatever it holds for them" (296). Safia stands for thinking individual.

Safia is a woman who does not let anything limit her universe. She realizes her strength, spread her wings and soar into the sky of freedom, making others also comprehend that they too have the wings to fly in that same vast sky. After her death, in the Interlude of *My God is a Woman*, Amrita pledges "[...] to continue the work that Safia had not been able to initiate".

POEM

I have sketched the journey of Safia through the following composition:

Towards Becoming a Being

*I have always been a victim of oppression
They have forced me into submission*

*But one day I thought
Why to bear their assault*

*Gathering the feminine strength, I stood up
And unveiled myself*

*I started flowing like a river
Overcoming every mountain and cluster*

*I sat with my own images
And discussed debated deciphered*

*I honoured my heart, revived faith in myself
And walked towards the ocean of life...*

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