THE FAVOURED DAUGHTER: GENDER SUBJECTIVITY AND PATRIMONY

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Abstract: Belonging to one of the most remote and poorest provinces of Afghanistan, Fawzia Koofi, in her courageous memoir presents the excruciating firsthand experience of the times she lived through. A mother of two daughters, an MP at the age of 30, almost died on the day she was born. But she strived against all vicissitudes and went on to become a huge inspiration in the lives of Afghan women and millions of women around the world. Her painful journey during the Mujahideen and the Taliban rule has been heart wrenchingly chronicled in her autobiography. At the beginning of every chapter, Koofi pens down important letters to her daughters. Through those letters, she inspires her teenage daughters to strive hard for making their country a better place to live in. As a female politician, she faces horrendous death threats every other day. But that does not deter her to fight for the rights of her country. The themes of oppression, nepotism, patriarchy, domestic violence, political corruption, polygamy, fundamentalism appears throughout her autobiography.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Oppression, Patriarchy, Polygamy.

Introduction: Fawzia Koofi is a politician of Afghanistan and women's rights activist, born in 1975. She is originally from Badakhshan province. She is currently serving as a Member of Parliament in Kabul. Her autobiography, from the very beginning, focuses on the plight of women. The province to which she belongs "is one of the poorest, wildest, most remote and culturally conservative provinces in all of Afghanistan" (v). According to the results of the World Fertility Survey, the demographic facts about societies such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Northern India suggest a culture against women, in which women are socialized to sacrifice their health, survival chances and life options. She laments the fact that this place has the highest rate of maternal mortality and child mortality in the entire world due to "a culture that sometimes puts tradition ahead of women's health" (v). To represent such problems of her province as well as her country, she strives for the betterment of those deprived people, inspite of facing death threats. Koofi recounts a dreadful memory from September, 2010. She was supposed to attend a political meeting in Badakhshan province, but was advised by security officials to postpone the trip due to a serious death threat from the Taliban. But she chooses to ignore the threat, because if she did not, then she could not do her job. The uncertain conditions of life for women in today's Afghanistan are immediately emphasized from the outset of the autobiography. It highlights the continuing presence of the Taliban even after years of U.S. intervention and the courage of women, like Koofi, to fight back.

She risks her life, every time she is out of home. She expresses her fear for her two little daughters, Shuhra and Shaharzad, explaining that whenever she leaves her house she leaves a note behind for her daughters so that in case she doesn't return home, they should know what to do. She says, "I have stared death in the face countless times in my 35 years, but I'm still alive" (4). She feels God has a purpose for her, "his purpose for me is to govern and lead my country out of the abyss of corruption and violence. Or perhaps his purpose is simply for me is to be a good mother to my daughters" (4). This purpose in her life keeps her going, inspite of several life threats.

Koofi feeds the reader about her polygamous family, which has played a major role in her life. Her father, Abdul Rahman, a member of the parliament in 1960s and 70s, represented the people of Badakhshan, the same people, whom she represents today. Her father was "outspoken, straightforward, and hard working, respected not only in Badakhshan but across the country for his generosity, honesty, faith, and fierce belief in traditional Islamic values" (10). Even her grandfather, Azamshah was a

community leader and a tribal leader. She remarks, “Politics runs through my blood as strongly as the rivers that snake all over Badakhshan” (6). She was even inspired by her father’s elder sister, who went to fetch her brother’s dead body when he was killed by the Mujahideens. Her father, Abdul Rahman, had seven wives, the seventh only 14 years old. Her mother was her father’s second wife. She narrates how traumatised and devastated her own mother was, every time her father married a new woman.

Koofi describes her family life, the role of her mother, and her power over the other members of the family. Her mother was her father’s favourite out of all his wives. Her mother took all the major reponsibilities of the house and is a perfectionist. She strives in order to make her husband proud. But if her husband became pissed off over a slightest mistake she had committed, he would make her life hell.

Fawzia Koofi is now a prominent politician in Afghanistan herself, and in sharing these kinds of hair-raising and terrible stories of domestic violence, she clearly invites the readers to see the power of patriarchy and the subjugation and helplessness of women in her country. She belonged to a well-to-do and rich family, where they grew up in suitable conditions. Even such homes witnessed domestic violence where women were treated inferiorly and beaten black and blue. She had very high opinion about her father's professional conduct, and the work that he did for the people in his district for almost 25 years, contrast sharply with her description of him as a “terrifying tyrant at home” (10).

The suffering of her mother on the day that her father was bringing home his seventh wife, the scene of her father beating her mother and yet the ignorance and naivety of her mother who had accepted the beating as a part of her husband’s "love" for her, are astonishing. Koofi relates that her mother explained to her, “If a man does not beat his wife then he does not love her. He has such expectations from me and he only beats me when I fail him” (11). She might be so delusioned that she couldn’t see the reality of being tortured by her "loving" husband. In other case, it might be that she was suffering from some kind of pyschological order. But here its not our task to gauge the pyschological state of her mother’s mind. Koofi's mother appears to have accepted the sad reality of her life as "normal" or "proper," and stubbornly rejected what seems to be the obvious truth of her life as an abused woman. She lived a life of denial but that “sustained” her. She was certainly not the only one who suffered domestic violence. According to a recent UN report, there is a 28 percent increase in violence against Afghan women. There are thousand such cases of horrific domestic abuse in Afghanistan which is sometimes documented by many international organizations and most of the times, those violences stay shut within the four walls of the houses.

In Koofi’s autobiography, the episode of her own birth is another engrossing part. Her mother was very weak because of previous pregnancies and physical abuse by her father, and did not want to have any more children. But she was hopeful that she would gain back the love from her husband by delivering a baby boy. Koofi laments, “Girl children in our village culture were considered nothing, worthless. Even today, women pray for sons because only a son gives them status and keeps their husbands happy” (12). During her birth, her mother was very ill and crippling with pain:

> For 30 hours my mother writhed in agony during my birth . She was semi-conscious by the time I was delivered; barely mustering the energy to express her dismay at the news that I was a girl. When presented with me she turned away, refusing to hold me. I couldn’t have been more different from Ennayet [her Brother]. He was a rosy-cheeked bundle of health. I was blue, mottled, and so tiny I was barely formed. My mother was so weak that she was on the verge of death after the birth. No one cared if the new girl child lived, so while they focused on saving my mother, I was wrapped in cloth and placed outside in the baking sun. I lay there almost for a day, screaming. No one came. They fully expected nature to take its course, and for me to die. My tiny face was so badly burned by the sun that I still had the scars as a teenager (12-13).

But hopefully she survived and from thereafter, mother and daughter built up an unbreakable bond. Even for the second time, her mother was about to throw her away into the river when the Mujahideen

were searching to kill them. But she did not throw her away because of the promise that she made to her during her birth to protect her, always. The RAWA organisation in their website cites that even today, Badakhshan "has the highest rate of maternal mortality in the world: 6,500 out of every 100,000 women die during child birth. And a woman in Badakhshan faces almost 600 times the risk of dying during child birth than her counterparts living in North America. Koofi notes:

> Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world. A lack of health resources and a cultural reluctance to openly talk about gynecological and pediatric care means doctors can be hard to find, and the few that do exist are badly trained. Families often seeking medical attention for a woman until there is absolutely no other choice and it's clear she will die otherwise. But by then it's often too late to save either the child or the mother (152).

Fawzia was the 19th of 23 children to her father's second of seven wives. Being a girl, she was abandoned in a manner which would be subject to criminal prosecution in any Western country, and in most other countries of the world. In Afghanistan, however, it was somehow acceptable for a mother, struggling to "earn the love" of her husband, to want a son, not a daughter. One can only wonder in horror at the mental state of a mother who, though severely abused by a man, nonetheless still strives to bear him a son and somehow earn his approval. Koofi does not provide much insight into these issues; while frequently praising the job her father was doing:

> I think I had a sense even then that was my father was a gr eat man. That whatever the stresses and troubles he brought home to us, even the beatings were partly because of the pressure he was under. The pressure of maintaining a home and extended family the size of ours, the pressure of politics, the pressure of reperesenting some of the poorest people in Afghanistan. He barely had any time for himself (20).

So she says it was justified on the part of his father to beat her mother because of the burdens he had. She does not detest her father for physically abusing her mother. She is rather not critical about her father's behaviour towards her mother and offers only this comment on his harshness and occasional brutality, "I don't condone my father's behavior in beating my mother the way he did, of course, but those times were different and it was the norm. And I know at other times he was a good husband to her, as much as tradition allowed" (20-21).

This statement coming from a woman who claims to be a women's rights activist, fighting for the Afghan women's welfare is indeed very baffling and perplexing. Even she believes in the Sharia law system. Describing her father's polygamy, she says:
Under the Shari'a law system my father espoused, a man was supposed to show justice to all of his wives equally, sharing himself without favor among them. I, too, believe in Shari'a justice. In its purest forms it is a fair system, because it is a system based on Islamic values of justice and is what all Muslims should believe (21).

This comment of Koofi is followed by her narration of tragic episodes of beating of her mother in which her father once "viciously tore out a chunk of her hair during a beating" (23). Koofi describes the fate of many women who are subjected to such horrific abuse, and have no way to leave the abusive husband to go back to their parents. In her mother's case, however, her family would have taken her back, but she couldn't bear to ask for divorce because, as Koofi explains, "she knew that leaving her husband meant losing her beloved children. In Afghan culture, as is the norm in most Islamic cultures, children stay with their fathers, not their mothers, after divorce" (24).

In her autobiography, she has presented the realities of being a girl in Afghan society. She recalls her sisters getting married off one by one with caskets of fine cloth and gold jewels. She thought a girl is as if "a jewel to be traded" (24). And it was only during the time of marriage a girl was treated specially, "Unlike the boys, the girls' birthdays were never celebrated, and none of my sisters went to school.

People saw no purpose in wasting money educating a girl because she would not be around to contribute financially to the household after she married" (24). Even her sister-in-law was just 12 years old when she got married to her elder brother who was 17 and she at that tender age was forced for a physical relationship. Even her brothers in her house had more power than her mother. During her childhood, she loathed being called as "*dukhtarak*" which means "less than a girl." From her very childhood, she had this sense of justice. Whenever her father ran to hit her mother, Koofi used to kick at him. She writes, "Even at that early age I had a sense of the injustice of the position of women in our culture. I remember the quiet despair of the wives were who weren't loved or noticed by my father, and the trials of those who were" (23). From her very childhood, she was inspired by Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi. She was astouned by the fact that "How is it possible that a woman stands in front of all those people? How can a simple woman lead them? And where does she find the power to speak to all those people?" (44). In Afghanistan, all she saw was women being subjugated, abused and oppressed. She was taken aback by the fact that women can even raise their voice and take a lead.

Koofi as young girl detested burqa. She says, "Peering through the tiny blue mesh eye slot, I felt as though everything was closing in on me"(51). She puts forward the notion that many people in the West today see the burqa as a sign of female oppression and religious fundamentalism. But she does not believe that. In the context of Western media, Gwen Bergner reveals how images of Afghan women oppressed by the Taliban were first mobilized to further the United States' imperialist agenda. Koofi opines it should be completely one's own freedom of choice. She writes:

> I am also aware that in some Western countries, wearing a face-covering burqa has become a political issue, with certain politicians and leaders wanting it to ban it by law. While I believe that all governments have a right to determine the laws and culture of their own countries, I aslo believe in freedom of choice, and I think Western governments should let Muslim women wear what they want (50-51).

But personally she feels wearing a burqa makes her less than human, she feels as if her confidence evaporated. She feels inferior, helpless tiny and insignificant, as if donning a burqa had shut all the doors in her life.

Koofi's mother played a very important role in shaping her up. Her father never supported the idea of her going to school and getting educated, no girl child in her family was educated and her father never felt the need to educate them. But after their escape to Faizabad, she asked her mother if she could join school. Her mother said, "Yes Fawzia jan, you can go to school" (43). The title of her autobiography *The Favoured Daughter* is possibly inspired by the fact that, among her entire family, she was the only female who was allowed to attend school, which then enabled her to complete her future education in Pakistan with a master's degree in business from Preston University. Her mother has been a driving factor in her life. Inspite of being so progressive, even her brothers were against the idea of her going to the school. Her mother was involved in her education asking her to recite the Quran. Even when she cut her hair short after joining the school, her brothers were very much against it but her mother supported her. During the Taliban rule, when her education was stopped mid way, her mother found a temporary school for her. After her father's death, inspite of having elder brothers, her mother became the head of the family. Her mother dealt with her brother's marriage proposal. She played the role of a matriarch. Her mother supported her through thick and thin. She learns self sacrifice, determination and courage from her mother. Her mother's stories taught her how to live. Even in letters to her daughters, she has mentioned how important her mother is. She writes, "Your grandmother left a far bigger legacy to all of us than she ever knew" (85).

Koofi's mother tolerated all the misery but after constant beating and abuse by her husband, she finally became very depressed and ill, suggesting that whatever endurance and strength this woman had formerly possessed had finally come to its end, with even her religious belief in the propriety of submitting to the abuse unable to help her anymore. In the case of illiterate men who were unaware of the laws, would consult a local Mullah what the religion teaches, and who are told, for example, by a

nearly-equally illiterate cleric that the Quran allows the beating of women, such outrages as those described above can, at least, be understood to some extent. Such beliefs, stemming ultimately out from the inability to read and understand the holy book, are rampant among the mostly-illiterate people of Afghanistan. Koofi's failure to level honest criticism such barbaric practices committed in the name of religion in her own home, however, at the hands of a father who was himself an educated and literate man, is disappointing. But it is an act of bravery and audacity in publishing this excellent autobiography which provides such a wealth of information for the reader.

The very detailed description of her father, his authority, his position with the government, and his attitude at home demonstrate her keen awareness of the reality that, for centuries, Afghanistan was ruled by men such as her father. Ironically, Koofi's father was killed by Mujahideen during the 1979-1989 civil war, while her husband was arrested by Taliban police and, during his imprisonment, allegedly contracted tuberculosis and died in 2003. One valuable aspect of this autobiography is that it presents us the wealth of cultural evidences, the authors provide about their surroundings. Each of these sociocultural realities shared by the author serves to improve the understanding of the reader regarding very closed, hidden aspects of life in various parts of Afghanistan. In the end of her autobiography, she hopes that her grandchildren will grow up in a proud, successful, Islamic republic that has taken its rightful place in the developed world.

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