

Islamization and Resistance in SAARC Literature in English.

-Mr. Hiten Solanki
Ph.D. student,
Sardar Patel University, V.V. Nagar.

ABSTRACT

*Exploiting religious sentiments of the polity and maneuvering nationalistic fervor for political power have been prevailing issues in contemporary Era of ideological anarchy. Most of the countries have been struggling in sustaining democratically constitutional governance owing to prevailing bipolar consciousness of the people. The terms Nationalist and Secular, which were previously referential to respected freedom fighters and rational persons, are now employed to abuse the particular ideologues. The political consciousness dominant in SAARC nations mark a struggle between two extremes: nationalistic ideologies that accentuate the revival of ancient history of the nation in the modern time demanding the assertion of religious identity of the nation and secularist ideologies that emphasize constitutional implications reacting against the nationalistic fervor. The SAARC writing in English discourse the aforementioned bipolar anticipations in the context of rationalizing the entire process of nation building. This paper is an attempt to examine the rational anticipations in against the religious extremism – specifically Islamic fundamentalism and the entire process of Islamization discoursed in literature of SAARC nations, Pakistan. Analyzing an eminent text: *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie from Pakistan, this paper attempts to examine the process of Islamization and reactionary anticipation of the protagonist with a view to unravel genuinely rational anticipation in against the religious fervor.*

Key terms: Islamization, SAARC, Religious nationalism, Fundamentalism.

Religious nationalism is a political project of those who would like to remain in power using the emotional appeal of religion. These trends have only led to greater social strife and violence leading to loss of life and property. It is high time that people of South Asia, who have suffered due to the advocates of a nationalism based on religious identity, realise that peace and prosperity of the region can only be possible with a nationalism that cherishes multiplicity, plurality, justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. (Fernandes vi)

- Denzil Fernandes

Exposing the religiously sentimental spirit of nationalism, Denzil Fernandes postulates fatal consequences of religious nationalism and advocates the appraising of plural nationalist sentiments. Fernandes further refers to Paul D'Souza and observes the uprising 'culture of polarization and intolerance', which is found prevalent across the region (Fernandes vi). The dominant political consciousness of the region is observed to have polarized into two extreme ideologies: religious nationalism and constitutional nationalism. The terms Nationalist and Secular, which were previously referential to respected freedom fighters and rational persons respectively, are now employed to abuse the particular ideologues, which suggestively ascertains the increasing extent of anguish among the people consisting polarized groups. The polarized development of thought process of the people destructs the neutrality and harmony of thinking patterns. The people are observed to have engaged in asserting their thoughts justifiably irrespective of inappropriateness of particular thoughts. In a way, the neutral, unbiased dialogue among the distinct ideologues do not occur genuinely and each dialogic discussion turns into scornful debate on religion and constitution. This paper is an attempt to unravel the resistance against religious fundamentalism, especially Islamization, by the means of analyzing select text *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie from Pakistan.

Delineating the religion and institutionalized religion, the paper examines discourse of resistance that rationalizes the religious practices and orthodox ideologies with a view to separate intuitive pursuit of spiritual religiosity from

that of practical exploitation of religion. The individual pursuit of mystic religion has been the part of grand history of the South Asian region. The modern history of the region also unravels the institutionalization of the religion for political purposes; the geopolitical partition between India and Pakistan is the quintessential instance of politicization of the religion. The old age religious dichotomies and geopolitical partition of India and Pakistan have been a stigma for SAARC that hurdles the complete fulfilment of aims of the association. In order to cognize the role of institutionalized religion across the region, it is essential to understand the formation of SAARC.

Familiarization with SAARC and FOSWAL:

SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation) is an exemplary association which consist of eight South Asian countries; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives and the latest one is Afghanistan, bearing common as well as contradictory characteristics as far as national character concerns. With proposal and constant efforts of late President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman SAARC was established in 1985 that has claimed recognition across the world as an economic regional association. The only apex body in the SAARC region, the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature strengthens the cultural connectivity by the means of literary and cultural interface in order to enhance the level of peace and tranquility among the SAARC nations. Since 1987, FOSWAL has been consistently endeavoring to integrate the think tank of writers, thinkers, intellectuals, creative fraternity and peace activists who share similar sensibilities towards socio-cultural and political practices prevailing in SAARC member nations. The aim of this apex body has consistently been to highlight the common concerns through cultural exchanges, literature, film, folklores, visual arts, performing arts etc. Emphasizing the common concerns through translating creative works, seminar, conferences, celebrating literary festivals, publishing anthologies and journals, exploring and documenting the folklore culture, attempting for the preservation of the culture, FOSWAL has become the strong link among the state members of the region.

SAARC Writing in English:

Despite the established nomenclature, “Commonwealth Literature”, which obviously denotes the sense: ‘writing of the writers from the formerly British colonies’, but is discarded by many scholars for various reasons, South Asian Literature is conferred new classification by the scholars with a view to familiarize the world with unexplored literary spirit and to strengthen the regional cooperation. SAARC writing in English, argues Ram Bhagwan Singh in the exceptional book *Creative Neighbours: SAARC Writing in English*, is neither parochial nor prejudicial classification; in fact, it is a new classification that assimilates literary traditions having the same composite Asian spirit. Refuting the possibilities of such classification based on economic cooperation, certain scholars may perceive the nomenclature SAARC literature skeptically; however, the fact that SAARC has expanded the association from mere economic cooperation to cultural integration adhere the new category of Literature. The endeavors of FOSWAL, the only SAARC Apex body, for assimilating and projecting the literary and creative writing of the region through various cultural programs and conferences can successfully resolve the scholarly skepticism about the classification of SAARC Literature.

Populated with diversifying mixed groups, the state members of the region share certain common languages; Urdu is a common language to India and Pakistan, Tamil to India and Sri Lanka, Bengali to India and Bangladesh and Pashtu to Afghanistan and Pakistan. English celebrates the status of an acquired language among all the state members of the SAARC; hence, the new literary classification, SAARC Writing in English, as well as translation of literature written in regional languages into English has gained considerable momentum. In addition to that, all the common languages of the region belong to Indo-European group and English is virtually a naturalized language in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; therefore, an exclusive branch of creative writing, Indian Writing in English, is prevalent in India.

Ram Bhagwan Singh establishes an inextricable articulation of indigenous spirit in SAARC writing in English with a remark, “The SAARC country’s literature in English is a part of their country’s literature in as much as such literature, like any literature in general, has the local habitation and character” (Singh xii). The accentuated articulation of common Asian spirit, undercurrent cultural homogeneity and value system marks the SAARC Writing in English predominantly. In the Era of postcolonialism, the literary discourse, either originally written or a directly translated into English, pronounces the reciprocation of native populace against the value system, culture, history and knowledge system established by colonial powers. The discourse attempts to revisit the established norms and to explore the new parameters deep rooted in the history that has been manipulated softly by colonial discourse. SAARC discourse in English proclaims the indigenous identity of the region in against the well-celebrated one that was conferred meticulously by the western world in an attempt to dominate the region

politically, culturally and economically. Despite the vehement proclaim of indigenusness in every discipline of knowledge system, SAARC English literature traces the current of globalism and frames the indigenous knowledge system in global relativities. Moreover, SAARC writing in English has been celebrated as a part of world literature regardless the intense articulation of the nativity. In a way, the writers of the region explore the ancient knowledge system from the modern perspectives and attempt to assimilate cultural peculiarities in a global current while retaining the essence intact. To be more precise, SAARC writing in English narrativizes a dialogic discourse of native issues like institutionalization of the religion for political purpose globally. In so doing, the writers of the region articulate the prevailing orthodox religious practices, utilization of religious sentiments of the people for political purposes and cerebral resistance against the orthodox religious practices as well as conscious exploitation of religion for political gains. *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie is a celebrated texts creating great impact on region in the context of Islamization that has been practiced in Pakistan with a view to suppress the women depriving them from equality.

Resisting Islamization in *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie:

Set in political backdrop of Pakistan, the text brings to surface the cultivating socio-political milieu of the country. The mysterious story of a daughter in search of her lost mother elucidates the present scenario of the nation. Aasmaani, in search of her lost mother, inquires about the past events as well as persons associated with her mother Samina Akram's disappearance and encounters a series of mysterious events revealing the actual political landscape of the nation. Brought up in Karachi, a Pakistani city under the influence of western effect, Aasmaani portrays a rational outlook of the social, cultural and historical perspectives of Pakistan. Aasmaani receives few letters from Shehnaz Saeed – a veteran sensation of television world and a good friend to Samina, which are coded with calligraphic symbols. The letters consist of Omi's memories pertinent to his emotional tie with Samina and his interaction with child Aasmaani. Familiar with the usual codes exchanged between Samina and the poet, Aasmaani attempts to decode the letters in order to have access to the actual cause of her mother's disappearance and the political assassination of the poet. In so doing, Aasmaani penetrates into the historical events of 1970s and 80s under the political administration of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia-Ul-Haq with a view to cognize the political activism of Samina and the poet that led them to supposed imprisonments, exile and political assassination. In a way, the text fictionalizes the popular trends of resistance in against the establishment: political and poetical. Shamsie has simplistically narrativized the resistance against the entire process of Islamization by the means of narrating protagonist's reactionary approach to prevailing religious practices and her mother's fiery political resistance against the Islamic political groups in favor of women's right. In course of action, the letters are found to be maneuvering by Edie, Shehnaz's son, who deliberately forges coded letter with a view to stir emotional bond between his mother and Samina in order to have Shehnaz restart her acting career. The forged letters, however, engages Aasmaani to believe the possibility of her mother and that of the poet being alive. In so doing, Aasmaani indulges herself in the quest of disappeared or assassinated Samina and Omi while contemplating, reacting and expressing the deliberate counter views on Islam. By the means of her memory layers, Aasmaani remembers thoughtful and reactionary anticipation of her mother and the poet in against the malicious process of Islamization. At several junctures in the text, Aasmaani herself exhibits her reactionary contemplation over the islamization.

In the beginning of the text, Aasmaani is introduced with her nudist drives while living alone in the flat adjutant to her sister Rabia's compartment, which along with the interior wall paintings of sea-creatures postulates her inner desire to exercise ultimate freedom of a woman living in an orthodox society of the nation. Aasmaani's irritation for the mosque situated in front of the window of her compartment and for that broadcasting of morning fiery sermons initially indicate her disinclinations towards certain Islamic traditions. The discussion pertaining to Aasmaani's career as a translator who ought to discourse a patriarchy free translation of Quran specifies her disinclinations towards a patriarchal orthodox interpretative process of Islamization. Shamsie has tactfully narrativized the reactions against orthodox Islamization separating it from the spiritual religion while defying the self-acclaimed supremacy of the West in favor Eastern knowledge system. Aasmaani contemplates over her knowledge pertinent to currents of the ocean and Poet's defying the East-West divide:

I knew the currents of the oceans include the Agulhas, the Humboldt and the Benguela, I knew currents move in gyres, clockwise in the northern hemisphere and anticlockwise in the southern hemisphere. I knew the poet had told me, years ago, that if we could only view the motion of currents as metaphors for the

gyres of history – or the gyres of history as metaphors for the motion of currents – we’d know the absurdity of declaring the world is divided into East and West. (Shamsie 24)

In course of action, the text cites several instances that refute the supremacy of hegemonic western knowledge system unraveling the Islamic scholarship that defines the indigenous concepts intellectually. For instance, Aasmaani refutes the western scholars’ claim about sonnet being the oldest poetic form, ridicules Archimedes, a celebrated historical figure, by referring to his invention like magnifying glass that was used as the great weapon in the war to burn the boots of the enemies. Contemplating over the questions for the quiz, Aasmaani think of her “favourite four Ibsn” (Shamsie 26):

“ – Ibn Khaldun (which mediaeval historian wrote *Muqadammah*, which expresses many of the thoughts of modern sociology?), Ibn Battutah (which mediaeval traveler covered 75000 miles from Spain to China, Tambouctou to Russia, and left behind written accounts of his journeys?), Ibn Sina (which mediaeval philosopher and physician wrote *Kitab-ash-Shifa*, covering a range of subjects including metaphysics, Aristotelian logic, psychology and natural sciences?), Ibn-al Nafis (which mediaeval physician was the first to explain pulmonary circulation, in *Sharh Tashrir al-Qanun?*) ... (Shamsie, BV, p.26)

In a way, Aasmaani’s scornful disinclinations towards Islamic orthodox traditions posits her reactionary anticipation against the process of Islamization and institutionalized Islam; on the other hand, she instills tremendous faith in actual Islamic knowledge system which is the ancient heritage of the nation. Shamsie has deliberately exposed the institutionalized Islam that has been prevailing political and general public consciousness of the nation. Aasmaani recalls the poet’s exposing one of her neighbors, who attempted to cleanse him for not observing fast during Ramzan by citing certain Quranic verses with superficial knowledge of Quran. The poet interprets the actual meaning of the Quranic verses, according to which the act of possessing the property of others with manipulations is against Islam; actually, the neighbor has disrespected Islam indulging in such act of manipulation against her relatives and she was considering her duty to cleanse the Kafir for not observing fast on Ramzan. The superficiality of public consciousness regarding Islam and Quran has been demonstrated deliberately in the text.

The political activism of the nation witnesses the exploitation of Islam in the field of politics of the nation. Referring to Hudood laws in the context of feminist political activism prevailing in Pakistan, Shamsie not only posits gender discrimination but also defines the fatal tendency of normalizing abnormal behavior of common people by the means of Islamization. Hudood law frames charges of adultery against the victim of rape upon her being failure to prove the crime; moreover, the testimony of male and Mullah are required to prove the crime of rape which is completely unjustifiable and injustice to the victim. In a way, the rape victim turns guilty of adultery and the punishments are determined as per the Shariya law which are inhuman in nature. The extremist approach to the religion directs political forces to legalize atrocious crime of rape and mass to perceive female as a non-existential object in the society. Sadia Hasan comments, “Kamila Shamsie by involving the trope of women’s activism in protest to Hudood laws, and referring to the real life cases of violence against women has opened up a dark side of Pakistan’s society which shaped the way women are looked at in the country” (Hasan Sadia, chap. 5, p. 111).

The position of Shehnaz in the field of acting and that of Samina in the field of politics demonstrates the female voice of resistance against all Islamized social agencies prevailing in the nation. Recalling the fiery rhetoric of Samina Akram against all unreasoned views of mullahs, Shehnaz reasons her views, “The assemblies haven’t even convened yet and already the mullahs in the Frontier are saying, “Of course women can work, but only according to the guidelines of Islam.” What guidelines? There are no such guidelines! May be that’s another reason for coming out of retirement. I don’t want to be one of those women the beards approve of, the ones who sit at home and cook dinner” (Shamsie, BV, p.59). The political activist, Samina Akram, channelizes all her activism for the freedom of women as well as that of nation from the orthodox Islamic hegemony. Samina not only exposes patriarchal Islamic views of mullahs but also unravels the agenda of politicizing Islam owing to power struggle in the nation. Anticipating debate with Maulana, Samina exposes the exploitation of religion for political purposes:

The subject is your obligations to the ummah. You take a territorial issue in Afghanistan and you make it into a matter of religious duty – you and your unlikely bedfellows in the West – and you spout phrases like “the unity of the ummah” as you hand those boys – those young, idealistic, confused, angry, devout, ready-to-be-brainwashed boys – the most sophisticated weapons and the best combat training in the world and tell them to get the infidel Soviets off Muslim soil. (Shamsie, BV, p.286)

In the fiery interview with Maulana, Samina exposes the practice of brain-washing the youth in the name of Islam and engaging them in the misinterpreted Jihad that is aided by western countries to control the political movements of the eastern world. In a way, Samina Akram instills powerful voice of resistance in against the islamization in the field of politics.

To conclude, one of prominent literary texts of SAARC Literature in English, *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie deliberately interweaves the grave issue of Islamization with the fictitious plot of protagonist's search of her disappeared mother. The soft injunction of institutionalized Islam into the public consciousness through several modes like scriptures, history is exercised in order to build an Islamized political consciousness of the nation. The discourse of SAARC literature in English narrativizes distinct voices of resistance against the fatal practice of Islamization and attempts to reinterpret the Islamic scripture from the modern lenses with a view to expose the manipulative Islamization.

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