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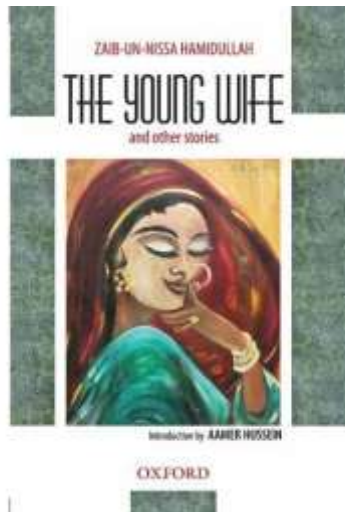
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*“Antara or Majnun?” - Exploring Femininities and Sexualities  
in Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah’s *The Bull and the She Devil**

**Sana Imtiaz, M.Phil. in English Scholar**



## Abstract

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*“Antara or Majnun?” - Exploring Femininities and Sexualities in Zaib-un-Nissa  
Hamidullah’s *The Bull and the She Devil**

The story *The Bull and the She Devil* written by Zaib-Un-Nissa Hamidullah represents the male-female dynamics in Punjabi, predominantly Muslim society. Hamidullah's collection of short stories *The Young Wife and Other Stories* raises various social and cultural issues in Pakistani, pre-dominantly Muslim society. *The Bull and the She Devil* unveils the psychological responses resulting from the suppressed male sexuality. It also explores how the identities and sexualities of men and women are conceived in response to pre-existing beliefs about gender roles.

Taking Mernissi's (2003) theoretical considerations as the starting point, the study unveils the dynamics behind sexual regulation of Muslim woman living in Punjab as represented in the short story, and whether woman's sexuality is seen as active or passive in contrast with that of men.

The analysis of the story reveals that the sexuality of Muslim woman is seen as active and the responses of Ghulam Qadir, the protagonist, are emblematic of his attempt to control and regulate that sexuality to satisfy his desire of being Punjabi machismo. His failure in the end results in his suicide.

## **Introduction**

Sexual in-equality is perhaps the most common phenomenon in human history and its roots could be traced into the social set of beliefs of those societies. *The Bull and the She Devil* by Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah is significant because it explores the dilemma of the protagonist, Ghulam Qadir, whose machismo and the world view of being "the master" trains him to see his wife as submissive. Failing to come to terms with this reality, he commits suicide.

The story which falls under the rubric of post-colonialism represents how gender operates in all its intricate details such as the home, the family, the body, the discursive practices and most importantly, the system of beliefs in a Punjabi village.

The story unveils how the dominant discourses prescribe only two roles for a man in relation to a woman. Either he could be *Antara*, the Arab legendary hero who loved his land and fought for his tribe. His wife was almost sick in his love but he was oblivious to her fascination. The other role is that of "*Majnun*" a man in love with a woman and therefore considered mad.

The first role carries with it all the positive connotations and the second role consists of everything negative in masculinity.

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Sexual desire results in developing close ties between a man and his wife and puts him on the verge of weakness and madness, in the light of the dominant discourses. Repression of sexual desire, hence, is an assurance of masculinity. The protagonist in the story under discussion chooses repression of his sexual desire for the gratification of his manliness. The paper explores the causes and repercussions of the repression of sexuality in the light of the feminist theory.

### **Feministic Praxis on Gender and Sexuality**

Mernissi (2003) believed that in Islamic jurisprudence female sexuality is seen as active, in contrast with that of European, and most importantly, against the Freudian concept, where female sexuality is seen as passive. She draws her ideas primarily from Ghazali, an 11<sup>th</sup> Century expert in Islamic jurisprudence and Sufism. His ground breaking work *Revivification of Religious Sciences*, offered alternative arguments, from that of orthodox Islamic philosophers, on various social issues.

Mernissi (2003) believes that men and women are socialized to see each other as poles apart in a Muslim society. Female sexuality is seen as *fitna*, a havoc which wrecks the functioning of the society. Segregation of sexes into public and private spheres makes them see each other as belonging to the opposite poles. This segregation is supported by the institutional means that support oppression of women such as physical beating and violence. Also, the set of beliefs such as folklore and art forms support this segregation.

Freud sees female sexuality as submissive and male sexuality as aggressive (cited in Mernissi: 2003) On the contrary, Mernissi postulates in the light of the arguments given by Ghazali, that both male and female have an identical cell (Ghazali uses the word *ma*, water drop) Similarly, Imam Muslim (cited in Mernissi: 2003) note that a woman causes fascination or irresistible attraction which a man experiences. "*She resembles Satan in his irresistible power over the individual* (p.42). Mernissi refers to folk Moroccan culture where the threat of female sexuality is voiced in the story of Aisha Kandish, a demon who is libidinous and assaults men in the streets.

Similarly, in Punjabi folk literature, a man who loves his wife is called "Zan Mureed" (a woman's disciple) which is a self-destructive state for this man. Similarly, a proverb which prescribes the low status and no affection for a woman says: *Aurat paoon ki jooti hoti hai.*" (A woman is equal to the slipper of the man)

Another proverb describes three causes of disruption in society is "*Zan, Zar and Zaal*" (Woman, wealth and offsprings).

The destructive and libidinous representation of Muslim woman also abounds in the Western literature. Lisa Lowe (cited in Moghissi: 1999) uncovered the sexual fantasies

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associated with Muslim woman. Gustave Flaubert (cited in Lowe 1991:76) sees Muslim woman as highly sexual. “*La femme orientale generated sexual pleasure, but was impassive, undemanding and insenate herself; her oriental mystery never failed to charm, her resources never exhausted.*”

Moghissi (1999) argues that the fear of female sexuality in Muslim society is for two reasons:

First, it makes men preoccupied with sexual performance, with prolonging intercourse and with searching for a sexual strategy that can meet female expectations in bed. Hence sexual relations constitute a continuing crisis for the believer, because they divert attention from God (Sabbah, 1988: 50, 90). Second, woman’s seductive power is a threat to Muslim social order. (p.24)

According to Moghissi (1999) the fear of female sexuality is not specific to Islam. Jewish traditionalists see women as having aggressive sexual drive and men are passive victims of her charms. Similarly, Christians saw women as dangerous because they arouse desire among men. Rehman (2002) notices that the sexuality of woman is regulated by attaching the concept of *Izzat* and *Asmat* with her. Having sexual desire or taking independent decisions about marriage and sexuality would be considered dishonorable for a woman.

However, the image of Mary and the concept of virgin birth enables the assimilation of this troublesome aspect of feminine into the legitimate areas of sociality so long as the woman desexualizes herself to become a secret and pure presence in the heart of carnal mystery. She becomes a nurturing, nourishing soil whose fecundity is entirely passive. (p.111)

Being denied the privileges, which are bestowed on the menfolk, but not on the women, propagate the concept of inequality of genders. Hussain (1994) notes:

Within this hierarchised relationship, it is not surprising that the bad woman is depicted as the one who shows scant respect for established norms of feminine behavior. (p.113)

This bad woman, in many cases, faces physical violence for her disregard of patriarchy. Hussain (1994) further points out that the woman is excluded from the discourses of power yet contain it with in socio symbolic discourse. Being the signifier of desire, the only role considered fit for a woman is to be a pleasure object.

Ruswa’s “Umrao Jan Ada” (cited in Hussain : 1994) recalls the image of courtesan in whose apartments, the poetry and music grows. She is the symbol of male fantasy

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because of her irresistible physical charms. Also, she poses a threat to the traditional family system. If a man is caught in her snares, the only outcome is the destruction of the basic unit of society, i.e., the family.

The next section of this paper analyses the representations of women in the short story. Furthermore, the identities and sexualities will also be discussed.

### **Analysis**

In the short story, *The Bull and the She Devil*, the story revolves around a man who is possessed by the haunting power of his wife's irresistible charms. However, he is more aware of the threat it poses to the patriarchy because of her power "to persuade" and her "soft accents." Also, her existence as a separate being was threatening because more people could have a share in her love.

"To possess her was his one object in life now. And yet, had he not already possessed her a score of times and over? Had he not claimed her again and yet again, night after night? Was she not, without any manner of doubt, his woman? His, by every claim that man can have over woman? And yet... And yet there was this doubt that disturbed and tormented him, this new element in the relationship between man and woman of even the possibility of which he had been oblivious." (p.43)

This new element is the fact that his wife's love is shared by the other people living in his house, i.e., his brother, nephew and the bull. Hussain (1994) postulates that the relationship between the husband and wife, as framed in several types of discourses demands complete obedience on the part of women of even the slightest whims of their husbands. She cites at least the code mentioned in *Bahishti Zewar*, by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi.

Understand this! The relationship between a husband and wife is for life. Therefore it is your moral imperative to hold the man's heart in your hand by obeying his slightest behest. If he asks you to stand all night with folded hands, you must do so, as in this alone lies your salvation. (p.123)

The discourses, similar to the one mentioned above, put all the responsibility of maintaining a relationship on the shoulders of woman. The kind of obedience demanded from her (i.e., understanding the male's intention with his little or no expression and adhering to it) is not possible if she retains her individual identity as a human being.

The matchmaker woman also instills the similar gender roles in the mind of Ghualm Qadir:

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For not only is Shirin as sweet as the scent of Champak flowers, but she is as supple as reed and will sway to your slightest wishes, for she is a child nurtured to womanhood in an atmosphere of tenderness and affection. One who, they say, has a heart filled to overflowing with love of everything living. And' here the old woman's furtive eyes had peered lasciviously into his, "that over-flowing cup of love will be yours to drink your fill. (p.44)

The discourse attributes the qualities of sweetness and complete obedience of the slightest wishes of her husband to his wife. Furthermore, being a loving and tender hearted person, she is supposed to satisfy the sensual desires of the husband according to his heart's desire. The woman then is represented as an object of male fantasy, a mystery to be unraveled and most importantly, not a human being but "*an over-flowing cup of love.*"

After the marriage, Ghulam Qadir treats her only as a body to satisfy his senses. To him, the bull, the lands and his wife are one and the same thing.

He remembered how, when first he had brought her here as a bride, all his ardent young manhood aflame, he had had his fill of her. To him she was, those first few weeks, a body. A body and nothing more. A body beautiful and soft that eased the so long suppressed desires of his senses. (p.43)

After gratification of sensual desires, the machismo demanded a complete denial of his separate identity. She must be punished for not being a part of her husband. The protagonist in the story beats his wife for the same reason:

But as the weeks passed and he saw her about their mud hut, the way she walked, the way she smiled at others, the tender look in her eyes as she patted the bullock, in his mind a doubt was born. For she remained a separate being, an individual in her own right, a stranger. Yes, a stranger, even though her body grew sweetly familiar. (p.44)

Ghulam Qadir gave a thorough beating to his bull because the animal was sharing love of his wife. He also hated his brother and nephew for the same reason.

"Faithless creature," he shouted at the poor, uncomprehending animal. "Even you have surrendered your soul into this She Devil's keeping." ... "She's after my soul as well," he shouted. "She wants to ensnare me as she has ensnared all the others. She Devil, She Devil, She Devil!" (p.47)

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Other than ensnaring the affection of his brother and nephew, the wife is shown to exercise a strong influence over the soul of the husband.

Khuri (2001) points out that a man's duty is to make love with the woman, not to love a woman. The tale of *Majnun Laila* is an instance of it. Literally translated as "Mad Man of Laila," *majnun* is a metaphor for every man who professes to love a woman, and by the virtue of it, he is in a state of mental sickness. Ghulam Qadir hates his nephew Allah Wassaya because he is a romantic lad, on the verge of falling in love with a woman.

That handsome strapping youth on the verge of manhood with something of the weakness of womanhood within him. A something that made him waste his time playing on a flute, gazing up at the moon or planting flowers round the house. (p.49)

The manliness demands a complete control over the sexuality of his woman. If a woman is proven to be wanton, honor killing is and should be the natural outcome for protecting the honor of the family. In the end of the story, Ghulam Qadir murders his nephew and hits his brother because both share love of his wife. His bull also receives a share of his beating because he is more in control of his wife, which is a challenge to his manliness.

The conclusion of the story is marked with Ghulam Qadir's jumping into the well as he sees the image of his wife in his imagination. This time he calls her "She devil!" with dried eyes, accepting the influence, the woman exercises over her and most importantly, convinced of how destructive that influence could be.

## Conclusion

Foucault (1976) postulates that power is an intricate web and even the have-nots exercise their share of power in one way or the other. The story reveals how the gender roles in our society forbid a man to recognize "authority" or "power" as an attribute of a woman, particularly in heterosexual marriages. Some discourses prevalent in the society offer only one explanation of female sexuality, i.e., its destructive power. The fixed gender roles in many cultures forbid a man to love a woman, rather he can only make love with a woman. The attributes of manliness demands a man to be in-charge of regulating the female sexuality. More specifically, the treatment Shirin receives at the hands of Ghulam Qadir in the short story, reflect the power relations prevalent in the society. It is this politics of gendering that I have tried to uncover in this paper.

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