

## A Feminist Reading of Tabish Khair's *Jihadi Jane*

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Feminism can be considered as a political, cultural, or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. It encompasses political and sociological theories and philosophies relating with issues of gender difference. The novel *Jihadi Jane* written by Tabish Khair displays an active portrayal of women characters and it revolves around their experiences, their choices, and their perspectives on life. This research paper tries to analyse *Jihadi Jane* from a feminist perspective exploring how the characteristics of feminism are presented or reflected in the novel.

Tabish Khair is an Indian English poet, novelist, and columnist. Presently, he teaches in the Department of English, University of Aarhus in Denmark. He was born and educated mostly in Bihar, India. He worked as a journalist in *Times of India*. He is the author of various books, including poetry collections, studies, and novels, His novels have been shortlisted for the Encore Award (UK), the Crossword Prize (India), the Man Asian Literary Prize and DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.

As stated by Sarah Gamble in *The Routledge Companion To Feminism And Post feminism*,

“Feminism is the belief that women are treated inequitably within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm, women become everything men are not: where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on. Under this rationale, which aligns them everywhere with negativity, women are denied equal access to the world of public concerns as well as of cultural representation. Put simply, feminism seeks to change this situation.”

Feminist theory emerged from various feminist movements tracing the history of feminism which can be divided into three waves as detailed by Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. First-wave feminism focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women by their husbands. By the end of the nineteenth century, the movement focused primarily on gaining political power and was campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive, and economic rights. Second-wave feminism viewed women's cultural and political inequalities as inseparably linked and encouraged women to understand the facets of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination.

The French author and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and her treatise *The Second Sex* made valuable contributions in the development of feminism. She acknowledged Jean-Paul Sartre's view existence precedes essence; hence "one is not born a woman but becomes

one." Her study focused on the social construction of Woman as the Other which she recognized as fundamental to women's oppression. She argued women have historically been considered deviant and abnormal and opposed the idea of considering men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire.

Third-wave feminism tries to challenge or avoid over-emphasis on the experiences of upper middle-class white women. The third wave's ideology also centres around the post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality in addition to the focus on "micro-politics". Further, it covers internal debates between feminists who believe that there are important differences between the sexes and those who believe that there are no inherent differences between the sexes. Furthermore, it opposes the idea that gender roles are owed to social conditioning.

*Jihadi Jane* narrates the story of two girls Jamilla and Ameena from the suburban Yorkshire in England. They after being influenced by the internet preacher Hejjiye from Syria, leave England and run to Syria to join the Islamic state and support the cause they strongly believe in. Their life changes drastically and they are required to make choices based on the trajectory of events in the story.

*Jihadi Jane* revolves around three major women characters namely, Ameena, Jamilla and Hejjiye and minor characters Halide, Ammi - Jamilla's mother, and the prisoners Dilnaz and Sera. All the three major women characters are well educated, well informed and are assertive and good decision makers. Ameena and Jamilla, being schoolmates, spend time together developing their faith by reading books and watching religious preaching on the internet. Both Ameena and Jamilla grow strong in their faith, and they decide to contribute to the fight in Syria. Moreover, both flee from England to reach Syria to serve in the war.

Ameena emerges as a strong character towards the progression of the plot. She moves from being a nonchalant schoolgirl, turning into practicing Islam, becoming stronger in faith in deciding to contribute to the fight against the enemies to becoming a suicide bomber. Though she remains lesser faithful than Jamilla initially, she decides to marry a fighter which is not an easy decision for a girl. She was ready to endure the hardships in the war zone. She marries Hassan and serves as a dutiful wife to him supporting him in the fight. Jamilla notes that Ameena was courageous, and she gave a brave smile when she left the orphanage after getting married to Hassan. She notes, "then Ameena was gone, shooting a brave smile at me" (*Jihadi Jane*, 106).

However, Ameena differs with Hassan's views when she understands that what Hassan tries to practice is against the religion. She is assertive in expressing her views even though she knew that she will be hurt or punished for talking against her husband – a man. "But that is not what my Islam says, she protested" (*Jihadi Jane*, 180). She is determined to safeguard Sabah, the captive boy, for which she was ready to receive the punishment of ten lashes. In the end,

she becomes a suicide bomber and eliminates Hassan and his mates thereby safeguarding Jamilla, her bosom friend, and taking revenge for the death of Sabah whom she considered to be her son.

Jamilla is firm in her faith and is ready to assert her views whenever her faith is under question. She condemns Alex, her classmate, when he tries to read a poem of obscene content reflecting adultery. She retaliates saying “Maybe ‘tis funny to you, I’ll say ‘tis an obscene poem, ‘tis ‘bout a sin me God forbids. ‘Bout adultery.” (*Jihadi Jane*, 16) Further, during her father’s death, her brother Mohammed prevents her mother from visiting the grave quoting religious practices and when the question of whether she wanted to visit her father’s grave arises, she establishes that she is empowered to make the choice when she mentions, “There was nothing to prevent me. I could have gone without telling anyone. It was not illegal in England, of course, and no guardian of the graveyard would have stopped me.” (*Jihadi Jane*, 22) We could also see that Jamilla is an independent woman as she takes up a part time job to support herself.

Hejjiye manages an orphanage located near to the town of Raqqa in Syria and she is the highest authority among the women in the orphanage, in Jamilla’s words, “this handsome, decisive woman.... something of a mother and a matron, a professor and a preacher, a confessor and a boss.” Hejjiye, acts as the public relations person for Daesh and she urges women to join the faithful as wives to the fighters. She possesses great leadership qualities and manages the orphanage extremely well by engaging all the women and girls there with a strict routine like that of a soldier. In another instance Jamilla notes her views of Hejjiye, “And here I was with Hejjiye – more of a pushy mother than my Ammi could ever be.” However, Hejjiye’s true object of running the orphanage gets exposed when Halide opposes her ways, and then she administers a crude treatment on Halide. She tries to eliminate Halide when she understands that what Halide discusses with the girls can change the course of her objectives. She even turns harsh in her treatment towards Halide by isolating her and prohibiting food for her.

Halide chooses the way of the faith and the righteous. She is well informed about her religion and possesses good knowledge of the different festivals. However, she gets disturbed when she comes to know that something is not right in the orphanage. Halide shares with Jamilla that there are three types of women, the older women who are either relatives of fighters or teachers, the young women who are going to be brides to fighters and the young girls who are trained to be suicide bombers. She is disturbed on seeing one of her school mates who had died as a suicide bomber in one of the recent happenings. “It is wrong to commit suicide. You know that,” she says to Jamilla. (*Jihadi Jane* 139). Later when Hejjiye questions her, she replies in a clear, calm voice, “I was taught to believe that Muslims neither kill themselves nor kill those who are innocent. I was taught that the Prophet, peace upon him, said that to kill one innocent person is the equivalent of destroying the world.” (*Jihadi Jane*, 141) Halide rejects injustice and chooses the harsh treatment meted out to her.

Ammi – Jamilla’s mother is seen as a person who is self-disciplined and organised. She exhibits qualities of love, care, and affection. However, she is seen as a silent person enduring the dominant male in the household – Jamilla’s father and later her brother Mohammed. From Jamilla’s description of her mother, it could also be understood that Ammi makes a choice to be so which should be acknowledged as a freedom of choice that she exerts.

In contrast, the Peshmerga prisoners Dilnaz and Sera show lot of courage. They both exhibit fearless opposition to their enemies. Jamilla describes Dilnaz as, “But I never saw Dilnaz falter. When angry, she would look at the interrogators boldly, despite once being lashed for such ‘lewdness’.” (*Jihadi Jane*, 155) Even Hejjiye who is a courageous woman, views the prisoners to be capable to overpowering the women in the orphanage. “Hejjiye did not trust Kurds” (*Jihadi Jane*, 152).

Hassan, on the other hand, exists as the representative of the patriarchal male that the feminists oppose. There are noted instances where he argues and tries to dominate his views on to Ameena. Hassan’s version of the religion was a do it yourself manual. He did not have any respect for Ameena’s scholarly reading of the religion. In an argument with Ameena on an Islamic precept, he fetches a rifle and puts in Ameena’s lap and says, “This is all I need to know about Islam. That is what you whitewashed Muslims have forgotten.” (*Jihadi Jane*, 176) When Ameena protests his view on killing Sabah labelling him an idolator, he slaps her and says, “That will teach you to talk back to your husband and harbour the germ of doubt”. (*Jihadi Jane*, 181). Hassan’s attitude towards women can be noticed when he volunteers to administer the punishment to his wife Ameena with the necessary words of piety, he says, “You see, a woman could not administer the punishment, not properly, for women are weak” (*Jihadi Jane*, 186).

Tabish Khair’s women in *Jihadi Jane* are round characters and we can observe that they evolve as dynamic characters as the novel progresses. They are unique in making decisions and asserting their views and values in various instances throughout the novel whether it is about asserting their ideologies or questioning injustice or opposing practices. They remain strong in their ideologies and demonstrate clarity while dealing with issues relating to rights, compassion, and empathy. We realize that the women characters are certain of what they are fighting against, how big their enemies are, and it requires such a strong courage and affirmation to lead the fight whether it is Ameena in her fight against Hassan or Jamilla’s or Halide’s fight against Hejjiye. The women characters prove to be fitting into the label – ‘EMPOWERED’.

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