

Sara Suleri's Meatless Days a Post Colonial Woman's Autobiography

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Abstract: *'Autobiographies' of immigrant women writers secured a prominent place in the realm of women's autobiography and the autobiographies of South Asian immigrant women writers acquired a special significance. The personal and communal identity crises resulted from migrations, the pangs of displacement, the memories and recollections of home lands, the struggle to cope with the new world and finally the active response to the new world by the reconstruction and relocation of identities are some of the striking features of 'expatriate writing'. All these are fully articulated in Sara Suleri's autobiography Meatless Days. It is largely a sociological and ethnographic document and analyses female experiences vis-a-vis political, social, religious circumstances.*

Keywords: *expatriate writing, reconstruction of identities, sociological, ethnographic document.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women have been dominated a lot for ages in patriarchy. A woman's life is bound from all sides and parental, personal relationships are inextricably linked together. 'Patriarchy' which is the ruling social system almost all over the world order that a woman's place is the home, her role as wife and mother is quite often synonymous with her total existence. But in due course of time, women have risen with a new vigour, new determination and a new perspective to fight against the odds of circumstances and prevalent customs and traditions. They made attempts to affirm their identity through their writings. They secured a 'sense of self' and tried to reveal the 'hidden forms of inwardness' through their writings. Thus woman's autobiography fictionalises 'self' and reveals how the writer forges her own voice to express herself and autobiography becomes a privileged site of historical agency for woman.

2. SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN WRITINGS

The Autobiographies of South Asian Women have special significance because these women are more traditional bound and conservative and their happiness is rooted among their personal relations and traditions are deeply venerated among them. Any deviation and alienation from these values create a great turmoil and havoc in their lives. Asian women are accustomed to lead a cosy, sheltered life in their cultures and their migration to west is wrought with agony and painful experiences. They feel the pangs of separation and isolation and find difficult to adjust to the new culture and customs. A girl who is always treated as an expatriate right from her childhood is in a state of "perpetual elsewhere-ness and the issue of alternativity, immigration experience permeate the narration of these writers"¹.

3. SARA SULERI'S MEATLESS DAYS

Meatless Days by Sara Suleri, a Pakistani writer is a post colonial autobiography which represents the re-construction of identities denied, displaced, disabled and disavowed by the forces of personal and historical migration and cultural relocation. This is a piece of expatriate writing, feminist confessional writing and fictionalised autobiography. Her memoir can be characterised as a narrative of identity and community that produces "a form of retroaction, the past as projective which in turn produces a necessary split between the time of utterance and the space of memory"². Suleri's Meatless Days is an impressionistic meditation on history, family, politics, gender and race. Suleri born in Pakistan and educated in USA put together fragments of memories and realities in South Asia and America in Meatless Days. There is a magnificent mixing of private and political experiences and the nation is narrated through family members, "the turbulent history of past and the most intimate and tragic

memories of her family members, her eccentric friends and her own tryst with the vagaries of the west³ are skilfully woven in *Meatless Days*. She talks about her Pakistani father, Welsh mother, capricious grand mother Dadi, the five siblings, her father's journalistic career and her own journey to the west. She forays into the histories of Pakistan, her family and friends. It is a personal narrative. She weaves her own history into that of Pakistan. She calls her book an 'alternate history'. She reminds the readers that she is writing a public history. She imbricates her family in the reconstruction of Pakistan. She returns again and again to her homeland, her people. The influence of Pakistan's politics and history on her day-to-day life is reflected in the portraits of her family and friends. She presents not only voices of various people but also various voices of her own self. She talks about different foodstuffs, rituals, social customs, political events and personal memories.

4. MIXING PUBLIC HISTORY WITH PRIVATE HISTORY

This constitutes the important aspect of post colonialism and frequent returning to past, slipping down the memory lane are characteristic features of post colonial writings. In Suleri's *Meatless Days* she extends her family stories into the public domain of literature. She talks about Pakistan's partition, the birth of a new nation. She reacts sharply at her father's celebration of Pakistan's partition. She also criticises the attitude of upper most class of Pakistan society which planned an Islamic state and proposed two nation theory. She also depicts the ineffectiveness of certain Government regulations. Shortly after Pakistan was made in 1947, the Government has banned the supply of meat in two days every week and these days are designated as meatless days, in order to conserve the national supply of goats and cattle (MD31). But this does not produce the desired result because people who can afford to buy meat can afford refrigeration. Here Suleri draws attention to the heterogeneous economic classes among Pakistan's society. Ramzan is the season of perfect meals and all her family members sit together and enjoy the intense meals. The family anecdotes/stories re-create the nation, the post partition Pakistan. The political upheavals, the changes of different leaderships are expressed in the description of different cooks in the house hold. General Yahya succeeds General Ayub and Zia-Ul-Haq succeeds Bhutto. Suleri describes the passage of history *vis-a-vis* the different cooks who worked in the house. She asserts that leaders enjoy ruling the country and the upper class people enjoy the services of the cooks. She also describes the dissolution of parliament under Ayub's leadership, the rise of Bhutto, the fall of Ayub and Yahya and the Pakistan war, the formation of Bangladesh through the journalistic career of her father. She contemplates about the future of Pakistan on hearing the news of Bhutto's hanging and the increase of fundamentalism under Zia-Ul-Haq. Her sister's death in tragic circumstances, the death of her mother correlates to the growing religious fundamentalism. Thus politics and history touch every life of her family and she invokes the idea of lost things, people, culture, history, geography. The brewing violence in nation is distinct from the turbulence brewing inside the Suleri's family members decide to re-invent their lives to go to live with the changes going outside.

5. CONCLUSION

Women writers forge a female bonding by evoking a female community in their works. *Meatless Days* is a veritable commentary on the lives of Asian women in a male dominated society and mirrors the expatriate women's experiences. "It is the narration of a once colonised nation through the lives of women"⁴. It begins with the statement "leaving Pakistan was tantamount to giving up the company of women"(MD1). Suleri in her memoir attempts to re-construct the absent community of women who are occasionally aware of themselves as women because women's business mostly depends on her socio-economic standing. Suleri is crushed by the weight of history of Pakistan and separation from her community of women, her grand mother, mother, sister, friends. She decides to go into exile and the instinct to write about family, home history, nation arises. Like all expatriate novelists she journeys back into personal history while reconciling with the present in an alien land. Daniel Wolfe of New York Times regards this as a book beautifully constructed "where the writer forays into Pakistan's history, the history of family and friends"⁵.

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