



Analysis of representation and relevance of a distinct Pakistani identity, culture, and society in Pakistani literature written in English

Submitted to

Ma'am Zainab Shahid

Submitted by

Tehreem Ali

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Introduction:

The term paper focuses on the analysis of the novel *How It Happened* (2012) written by Shazaf Fatima Haider, a resident Pakistani author. The novel presents the difference of old vs new generations in respect of their distinct ideologies, aspirations and assumptions. The author has portrayed a typical middle-class Pakistani family, living in Karachi, Pakistan. The story revolves around a Shia-Syed “Bandian” family progeny of the Bakhuraj village from India, who had migrated to Pakistan. The family lives under the matriarchal rule of their grandmother “Dadi” who stands firmly by her views. The narrator of the story, Saleha, a 15 years old daughter of Bandian family paints the process of arrange marriages in Pakistani society. There is a constant tug of war between Dadi and her grandchildren (Zeba and Haroon) in terms of their views and opinions regarding their marital and professional lives. Through various humorous, witty, and sarcastic scenarios, Haider has portrayed a relatable Pakistani society.

Analysis:

The central character of the novel, “Dadi” represents a typical Pakistani grandmother. Moreover, her character is a representation of a specific section of Pakistani society and the generation to which she belongs. She adheres strictly to her norms and traditional values and deems anyone deviating from them unfit. In Pakistani culture, the concept of “might is right” rules and here Dadi is the mighty and right one. The traditional concept followed in our society is that elders must not be disagreed in any regard and their decisions must be the final one. However, modern generations seem to contradict with this concept and a conflict between old and new arises. I, as a reader from the contemporary age, find this relatable, as I have to suffer through this

generational gap as well. I often find my ideology colliding with that of my elders. Our society has a strong disregard for opinionated youngsters especially girls.

As Dadi said:

"Ek toh I don't understand this obsession with contradicting everything I say. Good girls should be seen and not heard. That is how their in-laws like them!"

The book is relatable in the portrayal of a society where marriage has to be the foremost priority for a girl. In our society, the most significant event in a girl's life is considered her marriage and that should be happening at an early age at all costs. Our society has a standard age of marriage for a girl and whoever does not get married until that age, she is considered an outcast from the society. She is subjected to pity and questioning eyes from the society.

The same approach has been portrayed by the author in the novel in the following words:

"She remained unmarried until the age of twenty-seven, which was considered the point of no return in those days."

The main dilemma the characters are facing is to find a good match for Haroon, Dadi's apple of eye and favorite grandchild and her granddaughter Zeba. She despises the idea of "Love Marriage" and considers arrange marriage to be the sole right approach. All of her own children had to get married in the same way; therefore, it must be done with her grandchildren. Dadi's mission is to uphold the honor and value of the family, which is only possible through, arrange marriages that too in the same religious sect.

When Zeba said, "*I don't want to get married for the sake of producing children .I want a companion. I want love.*"

Dadi gasped and replied:

"LOVE! No one in our family has married for love for generations."

This idea of Dadi, that a thing, which has never been done before, must not be done in the future too, is a very traditional concept followed by almost all elders in our society. At one point Dadi said:

"She love-married. Shameless creature she was. Her mother tried to commit suicide and her father could not show his face in public again! Such shame she brought to her family."

Loves marriage is considered a taboo in our society therefore the author has depicted this in a very relatable manner. It is considered a matter of life and death in Pakistani culture as shown here.

When finding a good match for Haroon bhai, Dadi enlisted some qualities, which must be prevalent in his bride such as:

"She must be fully female, fully virgin, qualified to get a job but must not want to get a job and most importantly."

"She should be brought in with a dupatta on her head. She must not wear red, which would make her look too eager to be wed. Should never have strong opinions of their own, only those of their husband or in-laws."

The author has made a social commentary on the questionable approach of the traditional society that objectifies women largely. The undermining and belittling of a woman's status in our society is a widely practiced phenomenon. Through the character of Saleha, writer has given voice to the modern generation who finds this extremely offensive as:

“It’s so mercantile! It’s like we’re going shopping for girls!”

Being a woman of modern times, I can definitely agree and relate with this remark.

In a Pakistani society, sons are considered superior than daughters in almost every regard. In this story, the author has portrayed the same idea in the following words of Saleha:

“My grandmother took upon herself to the role of the matriarch, the mother of three eligible sons, who more than made up for the disadvantage of six daughters who would need to be married off one day.”

In Pakistani society, daughter-in-laws are often discriminated and are not treated with due respect. They are often subjected to dominion and supremacy of their in-laws. In “*How It Happened*”, Shazaf Haider portrays a similar societal mindset through the character of Dadi. As she once said:

“It’s a bad idea to give your daughter-in-law too much of a choice in the matter. What was this idea of inviting her along anyway? What kind of girl brazenly went with her in-laws to choose her own wedding dress?”

Later in the story, Haroon bhai, an IBA graduate want to study abroad, Dadi opposes this idea. She is of the opinion that he will get married to a non-Muslim girl there and their Bhakhurajian tradition will shatter. This part of the story is relatable in this regard that most people in our society usually have this notion that everyone who goes abroad ends up marrying there, that too to a non-Muslim girl.

Zeba is the representation of a modern girl of contemporary times. Her brought up had been in a different circle therefore she often disagrees with her grandmother's approach. She supports the idea of marital freedom as she says:

"Dadi, you're being unfair! Haroon bhai should have the freedom to marry someone he likes."

At one point Dadi shared her opinion for a suitable girl as:

"Arey Bhai, the younger they are, the more malleable!"

At which Zeba expressed her disagreement as:

"Dadi, are we talking about women or plasticine?"

However, Dadi always disliked her advancements. As in our society, elders usually do not acknowledge the views of Youngers. Any opinion which contradicts with theirs is seemed to be wrong and a huge disrespect. Dadi, a typical Pakistani grandmother, has a huge generational and ideological gap from her grandchildren. Therefore, she does not welcome their ideas.

Especially when Zeba ends up proposing a Sunni-boy who she liked, a huge conflict arose as she belonged to a staunch Shia family. In Pakistani society, sect-differences are considered a huge deal in most families. The author has depicted the usual approach people have towards contradicting sects through Zeba's marriage to a Sunni man. Religion tolerance and acceptance is very rare in most sections of our society. Author has discussed the religious and sect discrimination in a humorous yet satirical manner.

The author has shed light on the attitude of the society, which promotes blatant body shaming of women. I am a part of the same society depicted in the novel therefore, I can relate largely to the attitude of characters in this aspect. In our culture and society, the utmost quality a girl must

possess is physical beauty. No matter what her other virtues and qualities are, she must be fair in her skin color and perfect in her physique.

As Dadi described the bride for Haroon as:

“She mustn’t be anything but dazzlingly fair.”

“She’s pretty. Not beautiful. A little too thin. Haroon, you should tell her to gain some weight. Men like women with a little more flesh on them.”

Unfortunately, this part is very relatable for me, as I have been subjected to such body shaming numerous times as well. No matter the context, targeting a girl’s physique, whether too think or too thin, too fair or too dull is a common practice in our society. People consider it their utmost duty to demean and degrade a girl on her physical appearance, that too without any regard for her self-respect.

At a point in the story, Saleha voiced the thoughts of all readers in the following words:

“That Dadi was also racist and had a well-developed paranoia of all dark-skinned individuals was also well known to all who knew her.”

Such individuals like Dadi are largely prevalent in our society. It is not a matter of being right or wrong; it is a matter of their ideology. Their whole lives have been built on these thoughts and their all actions have been guided by these beliefs therefore they can never be completely changed. However, slowly and gradually, society has been moving towards a rather positive direction.

Conclusion:

“How It Happened” is a direct portrayal of a typical Pakistani society in terms of arrange marriage vs. love marriage, generational gap, and societal standing of women. Through the character of Dadi, author has given voice to the typical societal attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. Usually, the old generation remains glued to their ideology and give no space to revolutionary ideas. However, societies are dynamic and subject to change. New generations have shifting ideologies, which contradict with the previous ones therefore generational conflicts arise. Through the characters of Zeba, Haroon and Saleha, author has voiced the opinion of contemporary readers like me. Therefore, I am able to understand and relate to this novel to a vast extent.

References:

Haider, S. F. (2012). How It Happened. Penguin India