



## REPRESENTATION OF ASSERTION OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE THROUGH SELECT MUSLIM WOMEN'S MEMOIR

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### Abstract

*This paper deals with the assertion of identity and culture in selected contemporary memoirs by Muslim women in India, namely, Zarina Bhatti's Purdah to Piccadilly, Seema Mustafa's Azadi's Daughters and Shaukat Kaifi's Kaifi and I Presently. Muslim women are educated and employed. They are aware of their rights and have become assertive. They have a say in their marriage, divorce and many other issues. However the change is not widespread but there is a growing awareness about the rights and a desire for a better life. Hence, there is a need to bring awareness in this regard so as to urge the marginalized women to get inspiration from their counterparts.*

**Keywords-**Identity, Culture, Memoirs, Assertion, Muslim Women, Stereotypes

### Introduction

Modernization is a process which has caused immense transformation in societies in terms of education, employment, gender roles and has expanded opportunities for women. But still, Muslim women face discrimination in employment, education and several other areas. They are controlled by patriarchal norms. It is evident that issues of discrimination and marginalization of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular is complex, but a serious matter of concern. However, several Muslim women have challenged gender discrimination at all levels.

Generally speaking, identity is composed of some attributes which are representative of people's culture. Moreover, the concept of identity is inclusive of the peculiar characteristics of people of a specific region. Therefore, the present study seeks to study how Muslim women construct their identities resorting to rejection of the patriarchal ideology and simultaneously dispelling stereotypes related to them. Consequently, the outlook of Muslim women has been changing gradually leading to change in the overall Muslim community. In fact, empowerment of women is the key root for the development of a society.

### The Concept of Identity

Identity is an ambiguous term, so it is difficult to have a fixed definition for it. It means different for different people. The term 'identity' is derived from Latin 'idem', meaning "the same," the term however, suggests both similarity and difference. The online dictionary defines identity as "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is".

The following are some of the definitions:



Identity is “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2).

“Identity is used in this book to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng 1995, 1).

It is important to note that identity is a social construct as it involves how an individual is perceived by the self and society. The elements that compose an individual’s identity are age, gender, language, religion, nation, and profession. In addition, the elements such as an individual’s behavior, attributes, opinions, role in the society, and most importantly their relationship with the society also constitute identity.

### **The Concept of Culture**

The word ‘Culture’ is derived from Latin ‘Cult’ or ‘Cultus’ which means tilling or refining. Briefly, culture means cultivating and refining. Culture includes Arts, religion, music, language, literature, sculpture and science. Moreover, customs, traditions, festivals and opinions as well can be seen as aspects of culture. The following are some of the definitions by Anthropologists:

“A culture is the total socially acquired life-way or life-style of a group of people. It consists of the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are characteristic of the members of a particular society or segment of a society” (Harris 1975: 144).

“The concept of culture as everything that people have, think, and do as members of a society. This definition can be instructive because the three verbs correspond to the three major components of culture. That is, everything that people have refers to material possessions; everything that people think refers to those things they carry around in their heads, such as ideas, values, and attitudes; and everything that people do refers to behavior patterns. Thus all cultures comprise (a) material objects, (b) ideas, values, and attitudes, and (c) patterned ways of behaving” (Gary Ferraro, 1992: 18-19).

It can be implied that culture is not a new but a complicated phenomenon. It can be defined as a way of life. Culture is transmitted from one generation to another. And culture differs from place to place. In other words, every country has a distinct culture. In fact one culture has an impact on the other in terms of language, religion, dressing style etc. Generally, “stories, beliefs, media, ideas, works of art, religious practices, fashions, rituals, specialized knowledge, and common sense (Griswold 2004: xvi) are regarded as the attributes of human culture.

Further, culture is known to play a specific function in social life. According to Griswold, “The sociological analysis of culture begins at the premise that culture provides



orientation, wardsoff chaos, and directs behavior toward certain lines of action and away from others”(Griswold2004:24). Culture is a complex phenomenon. Griswold highlights that culture is distinct from the society but at the same time he contends that human beings do not experience culture isolated from the society. And Griswold calls this characterization of the cultural elements as artificial: “There is no such thing as culture or society out there in the real world. There are only peoplewho work, joke, raise children, love, think, worship, fight, and behave in a wide variety of ways.”(Griswold 2004)

### **Assertion of Identity and Culture**

According to Oxford online dictionary, the word ‘assertion’ means “A confident and forceful statement of fact or belief”. And Macmillan online dictionary defines it as “a definite statement or claim that something is true”.

The most misunderstood area is the subject of Muslim women. The identity of Muslim women have long been misunderstood and misrepresented.The common stereotypes related to them are passive, backward and submissive. These misconceptions mainly arise due to lack of knowledge and lead to the deviation from their real problems. Hence, there is a need to eliminate all these misconceptions by asserting their identities in true sense.

The role of women, their cultures and identities evolved with the intervention of feminism, modern ideology and the impact of other cultures.It is important to note that literature has the power to redefine and assert the place of women in the society.Therefore, Muslim women redefine and assert theiridentities through literature especially the autobiographical form. They have used literature to voice out their opinions and assert their rights.In this regard, the present paper seeks to analyze the memoirs by Muslim women in India, also to understand how successful they have been in representing themselves and the society.

ZarinaBhatty’s*Purdah to Piccadilly* depicts the life of a woman who was born and brought up in UP, India. Bhatty struggles to reject the stereotypes and patriarchal norms. She narrates her life experiences and how she overcomes all the barriers to achieve her dreams and aspirations. Additionally, she quotes a Persian proverb in the Afterword: “Himmat-e-Mardan, madad-e-Khuda” which means God helps those who help themselves. Also, she highlights the impact of partition and the political changes on the Indian Muslims. She also tries to bring out the plight of Indian Muslims who chose to stay in India – they had to embrace the minority status despite their significant contribution in the freedom struggle.

The memoir *Azadi’s Daughter*by Seema Mustafa is a compelling narrative of a dauntless woman’s journey. It is a fusion of personal and political account which contributes to the political and historical understanding around the lives of Muslims in India. In the memoir, Seema Mustafa highlights the dominant concerns of Indian Muslims- security, employment, education and housing. Sheasserts that she is a Muslim culturally but not religiously. She also examines the current state of secularism where people face marginalization and threat of violence merely for exercising their right to religion, to livelihood and even to what they eat.



Moreover, she stresses upon the fact that the National Identity of Muslim has always been an area of concern. The Indian Muslims who chose to stay back in the country after Independence are proud of their Identity and that their struggle for the issues that concern them should not be confused with being either against India or Pro-Pakistan.

Another memoir, *Kaifi and I* by ShaukatKaifi presents a portrait of a woman who is a wife, mother, and an artiste. ShaukatKaifi is an Indian social activist, eminent Indian theater and film actress. She was born into a Muslim noble family in Hyderabad. She is the widow of the revolutionary Urdu poet and film lyricist, KaifiAzmi. They have two children, ShabanaAzmi, a distinguished actress of Indian cinema and Baba Azmi, a renowned Cinematographer, and so a part of the Akhtar-Azmi family. The memoir deals with different themes – personal, political, women's rights, communal violence, domesticity, marital and familial relationship. Shaukat details about her life of how she married against her family's wishes. Also, she gives a vivid description of the communist party which played a significant role in India's independence as she lived and witnessed the life in the commune very closely. Furthermore, she balances her life at home, successful career and manages to support herself and her family. She chose to work in theatres and movies as an actor at the time when women did not step out of home.

## Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the concept of identity is indicative of one's personality of who they are and what they are. The elements that constitute identity are culture, language, opinions, religion and region etc. On the other hand culture is the way of life. The aspects of culture are Arts, science, language, sculpture and so on. The present paper has attempted to explore the assertion of identity and culture in the memoirs by Muslim women. Hence, it can be implied that the women in the memoirs have struggled against all the prescribed patriarchal norms. Moreover, they have shown dauntless spirit to fight for their own rights and stood for themselves and also for other women. By and large, they have expressed themselves on various issues including politics thereby carving out their own identities.

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