
Taboo by Fouzia Saeed: Book Review

Hassan Bin Zubair

PhD Scholar (English Literature), Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Hassan Bin Zubair, E-mail: hbz77@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Taboo (2001) is a remarkable book on Pakistani prostitution, red light area, oppression on women and the other linked matters related to this on which mostly people do not want to talk or discuss it openly and suppose all these matters as a taboo. Being a woman, it can be called a courageous effort by Dr. Fouzia Saeed that she took herself to that locale and spent eight years there in the red light area of Lahore, which is mostly known as Heera Mandi, Red Light District or Shahi Mohallah. This is not supposed a good place to visit even for men and this is an evident point of Fouzia Saeed's dedication and quest for the positive results and observation. And finally she brought all her experiences and observations clearly in the shape of her book Taboo. She had face a huge pressure and criticism after publication of this book and it was quite unconventional for the society to accept all these realities which were like a bare truth and nobody was interested to accept and own that part of society. This book consists of thirty three chapters in which introductory chapters are also included. There is a big part of interviews are included in which the direct interviews and discussion with the prostitutes, their family members and pimps are included. All the norms and culture of this hidden part of society is revealed in this manner first time.

Saeed has presented the real account of information of the prostitutes of this Mohallah with the actual names of those girls e.g. Laila, Razia, Soni, Chanda and Faiza with their true life stories. She has also described the real hidden culture of this red light area and familiarized her readers about the usage of specific hidden terms by the pimps, prostitutes and customers of this area. Along with all these details, she has also presented a vast account of knowledge about the artists, musicians and dancers who are produced from this fertile area and serving the lime light of the country. Saeed has provided a great knowledge to understand the structure and the supreme hidden powers behind it, the role of different politicians and influence at the governmental level in different times have remained the key objects which kept this business continue.

Fouzia visited the red light area in Lahore for eight years before she penned her book 'Taboo'. Pakistani author and social activist Fouzia Saeed vividly remembers an incident where a couple of young men on the streets of Lahore followed her from her hotel room to her car. "A woman, who is unaccompanied by a man, is considered to be amoral in Pakistan. What these people were trying to do was to ascertain whether they were right about me or not," says Saeed. "If those men had followed me further, their suspicions would have been confirmed as I drove straight to Shahi Mohalla, a red light area in Lahore," says the social activist, who spent nearly eight years in the dinghy bylanes of Shahi Mohalla, meeting prostitutes, pimps and customers to collate material for her book 'Taboo - The Hidden Culture of a Red Light area.' "For the first time in my life I was not angry at being considered a loose woman. The concept of morality as defined by my culture has been long shattered, to be replaced by a sense of understanding for women who are used and abused by the very people who call them names," she says. Fouzia, who has a PhD in Education from the University of Minnesota, has spent her life as an activist and researcher on women's issues in Pakistan. She has the distinction of founding 'Bedar' (which means 'aware' in Urdu), the first non-governmental organization (NGO) in Pakistan that provides services to victims of rape and domestic violence. Fouzia also loves to perform traditional Pakistani folk dances. The taboos placed on women, who dance in public and the insinuation that "women artistes are nothing but prostitutes" led her to explore why her society denigrates women whenever they wish to express themselves publicly. "I kept going back to Shahi Mohalla for about eight months before finally deciding to write the book. I had questions about the performing arts in relation to prostitution and about the stigmatization of women who perform in public," she says. Published in September 2001 in English,

the book has been translated in Urdu, Hindi and more recently in Marathi. “It is a risky subject and I was prepared for a backlash by fundamentalists in my country. But the book came out around September 11, and everybody got so absorbed with the World Trade Centre carnage that it gave the book a chance to take root in public consciousness.” Fouzia insists that one of her goals is to demystify prostitution. “Unless we understand this phenomenon we cannot come up with a solution. We’ve got to move our attention from them to us because the problem may exist within us.” She points out that it was the male powerful elite in the subcontinent that created Kanjar, the caste that takes up prostitution as an occupation, for their own entertainment. “On the flip side, they also created the modest woman and the good wife. So my analysis took me in a direction where I started understanding this good-woman, bad-woman idea,” says the author who has now learnt that to bring about change in a society one needn’t always be confrontational. “There are many other healthy ways of doing it and I am exploring all of them,” she adds.

Fouzia Saeed’s book captures explicitly this mixture of liberal, feminist impulse with the titillation that the figure of the prostitute produces in Pakistan, and the production of the book with its photographs of dancing girls with their calves strung with bells, men showering money over dancing girls and prostitutes at their doorsteps waiting for clients accentuates this effect. The topics discussed in the text range from the political life of the Mohalla, police abuse, rivalries and interdependencies between musicians and kanjars [the pimp/prostitute caste], competition from prostitutes outside the kanjar caste of the Mohalla, the aspirations of young girls to become film stars, to tangled family relationships, generational gaps and anxieties over ‘getting their daughters married’. She attends to the Mohalla’s internal discourses of lamenting the decline from the noble stock of Tawaif, which is reflected the Nawab clientele being replaced by common men off the street who are more interested in prostitution than courtly dance and recital. Saeed stamps over these stories the message that women of the Shahi Mohalla are not so different from their counterparts in the larger respectable society. However, this objective is hamstrung by her persistent exoticizing of the women of the mohalla through the narrative style she adopts. In *Taboo!* We find the author struggling with her positionality between an academic, a fiction writer and an activist. As an activist, she claims “my book is about eliminating the social stigma associated with women in this profession”. She declares that a “straight academic treatment of this subject would not be a good way to achieve this objective”, yet she sounds like a positivist ethnographer when she says “I show these people as they are”. She is also a feminist researcher who wants to be visible in her work. Towards the end, and especially in the epilogue to the new edition, the author goes into scholarly mode as she tries to develop her theory of ‘good women’ and ‘bad women’ and the politics of morality. Of the many stories that run parallel in the book one is of Saeed’s transformation from a curious visitor at a kotha to a myth-buster, an international expert and consultant on gender issues in Pakistan, and, of course, celebrity author of *Taboo!* She vividly describes how her journey as a woman was fraught with disapproval from family and friends, how her colleagues at Lok Virsa turned against her because they did not like her work, and how she was intimidated by police for carrying out fieldwork in the Mohalla. Once she overcame these difficulties, she not only managed to win over her family and friends but also started confiding in them her field findings the ‘juicy stories’ that they seem to have anticipated from her fieldwork. At one point she tours American visitors around the Mohalla with a group of her urban cousins who covered their faces with dupattas to avoid being seen in the Mohalla by future husband and in-laws. The visitors seem to have thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle of being so close to these forbidden women and actually being able to touch them as if they were objects. At personal level, Saeed hardly speaks about her anxieties, internal struggles, and the transformations during the course of this journey from a lay observer to a ‘feminist researcher’ of prostitution. In other words, it appears as if she renders herself visible to the reader only to the extent that she is “a PhD girl in the red light area” (*Taboo*, 2001. p.13). A careful reading, however, would suggest that unlike some ethnographies which strive to give voice to the people they study, in *Taboo!* It’s Saeed who speaks through her respondents rather than vice versa. So, readers should not be puzzled when they find a respondent presenting academically coherent and theoretically informed arguments favoring of women’s empowerment or lamenting patriarchy.

Saeed explores the performing arts of Lahore’s Shahi Mohalla, a district which is home to many of the popular performing artists of Pakistan. This is a place renowned for its Indo-Asian traditional cultures of singing, music and entertainment. This Pakistan, a devoutly Muslim society, prostitution is grouped into this unofficial ghetto of night life. Women are desired but denigrated, doubly subalterned in their own society. The book is published by OUP, and printed in Pakistan to keep the price low enough to reach its target audience. Saeed had to drive around a red light district at night, an attractive woman on her own. Between 11 pm and 1 am, Shahi Mohalla comes to life with the sounds of male musicians (Dhol wala) playing drums to their dancing girls (Kanjar) in their performance rooms (kotha) for their wealthy clients (moti asami). Typically, these musicians belong to the Mirasi caste, and the dancing girls belong to a family with a local performing/prostitution tradition. These relationships are as complex as the twists and turns in the 500-year history of courtesan entertainment in Shahi Mohalla, a nursing ground for Pakistan’s

entertainers and performers, who now dominate national television and cinema. Saeed talks about the sect and religion of pimps and prostitutes that the majority of them are Shiite (Shia) Muslim as they get official and religious liberty of having secure sex relations. Young daughters are prized for they can be sold or married off to clients keen to 'take off their nose rings' (*Nath Utarwai* – Deflower the Virgin). Many years later, those now old prostitutes cannot marry and cannot attract interest in their performances, and so they become stuck in the role of the looking after the *kothas* (*Brothels*). Saeed's performance/prostitution study is over three hundred pages long. However, much of it is repetitive, and sometimes the personal, story-telling narrative detracts with its slow pace, over ornate dialogues and inappropriate descriptions. In sum, this book is a creative crossover text and will appeal to an Indo-Asian educated elite public, as well as academic professionals working on sex and gender studies, music and performance.

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