

## QUEST FOR WOMEN SPACE: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN CYRUS NOWRASTEH'S THE STONING OF SORAYA



**C.V.DIVYA**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Vimala College (Autonomous),  
Thrissur, Kerala, India

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In the beginning God created human beings as man and woman, in His own image and likeness. He imparted the divine dignity equally to them capable of creating a history. However in the course of history woman's equality with man has been relegated to the background and to be a woman has almost become controversial in many cultures, forgetting the mystery of our divine creation. A woman who is in search of dignity and 'space' is always placed in a hostile milieu. Down through the centuries we hear the lamentation that

The woman I am / Is not what you see/ I'm not just bones and crockery.

Longing that love / might set men free/yet hold them fast in loyalty.

.....more over love / make room for me. (*Unquiet Bed* 1-16)

This paper is tentative enquiry to highlight that there is an inexhaustible quench for having 'women space' in Nowrasteh's *The Stoning of Soraya*. It is an American Persian language drama film adapted from French Iranian journalist Friedoune Sahebjam's best seller *La Femme Lapidee* which in turn was based on a true story. The journalist happened to hear a harrowing tale of the stoning of a young lady 'Soraya' as he was stranded in a remote village. As he turn on his tape recorder narrator Zahra, the aunt of the lady takes him back to the story saying that she wants to take her voice to the world. The opening scene of the film Zahra the victim's aunt burying the bones of Soraya whose body was dropped by the banks of the river, where the dogs got best of her, portrays before us the innocent suffering she had to undergo in a male chauvinistic society. Women who belong to the weaker sections of the society face double

injustice and inequality. They have been victimized of ill treatment, humiliation and exploitation for as long as written records of social organization and family life are available. Given the subordinate status much of gender violence is considered normal and enjoys social sanction.

Soraya's husband Ali tries to get a divorce from her in order to marry a 14 year old girl saying that he can't support two wives. Soraya refused to give the consent. Fearing Ali, the village priest too tried to convince her offering her his temporary wife's post that was to become a holy whore. The home which is supposed to be most secure becomes the place where she is exposed to violence. Regarding marriage Simon de Beauvoir in his famous work *The Second Sex* has rightly observed:

The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness..... but that it mutilates her. Real activities, real works are the prerogative of her man: she has mere things to occupy her which are sometimes tiring but never fully satisfying. (496)

The traditional role assigned to a woman in a male dominated society is that of passive beings expected to play their predetermined roles as wives, mothers, housewives, with a very little room for autonomy. Accused of adultery Ali dragged her into the streets beating her badly leaving bruises all over the body. When faced with domestic violence, woman become less resistant supported by few people and often recognized by none. The last pleadings of Soraya and her aunt Zahra fell on the deaf ears of the villagers as they treated the domestic violence normal or deserved. Soraya was quickly convicted. A society which is dedicated to dehumanize women denies her 'space' and identity. Nowrasteh succeeded in projecting marriage as an institution that has sealed the fate of woman down the generations making them play a secondary role. Mesogyny and child marriage were prevalent in that society where Ali easily gets the consent to marry a 14 year old girl.

Repression indeed is the most powerful weapon that is used against woman. This has been instrumental in their disillusionment as it constantly fragmented their bodies, lives, beliefs and emotions. Soraya voices the agony of this repression, the agony of misunderstanding and rejection. Soraya's final words to the villagers resounds the aspirations of a female heart craves for self expression. She asks:

How can you do this it seems you don't know me. I am Soraya. I have been in your homes. I have shared your meals. I am your neighbor, a mother, a daughter and a wife. How can you do this to me? How can you do this to anybody (SS)

The woman strapped of all rights and without recourse genuinely confront the corrupt men who use and abuse their authority to condemn Soraya 'an innocent soul' to an unjust and tortured death. Silence of woman has been often misunderstood as their incapacity to be as they are and prove themselves. So violence of different kinds is unleashed on woman. Wearing her marriage white gown among the dark dressed villagers Soraya stood as a model of chastity. Buried up to her waist in a hole dug for

the occasion she was pelted with rocks and profanity by the male villagers until she dies. We hear the wistful sighs and cries come from the innermost recesses of the victim when her father, husband and two sons threw stones on her.

The 'zero political courage' to speak against the obvious barbarism of stoning made the scenario worse. The spark of Soraya's eyes in the stoning scene strikes the widower, the so-called culprit and he walks away in tears. Deprived of everything in a male dominated society Soraya was made marginal socially, politically, sexually and culturally and confined to her fate. Buried to her waist in a hole at the center of the village square she reduced to tattered rags of flesh by a baying mob's hurling stones. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan in their *Literary Theory: An anthology*, remarks:

... the long tradition of male rule in the society has silenced the woman's voices, distorted their lives and treated their concerns as peripheral...to be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all.( 527)

The only voice raised for Soraya was her aunt Zahra. The unstoppable and protective aunt fuses in one small body the moral indignation of all womanhood, all protestors, all the world. Her attempts to flee with Soraya and the meeting with the mayor of the village were in vain. She even offered to switch places with Soraya. As Soraya's plight grows more futile Zahra's outrage turns fearless and loud offering an adamant ethical counterpoint to the slow beat of mob bloodlust gathering in the village around them. Courageously she reported everything to the journalist. Even though village men tried to seize the tape record the journalist escaped with the tape. We see the screaming Zahra who at her life stake announces the atrocious brutality to the world. The longings of a woman for autonomy and space are clearly depicted here.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century Iranian poet Hafez reminds us not to act like hypocrites who think that he can conceal his wiles, while loudly quoting the scriptures. Zahra who like a phoenix bird arouses from the ashes created by the patriarchal society to carve an identity of her own ensures us that still there is hope. Though the titular character Soraya gets stoned to death her story gets out into the world which may help us to raise awareness about the barbarous stoning practice. What happened to Zahra is yet another question which has to later throw light upon. Along with that when we move forward we should't forget that Zahra too is a woman who should be provided with actual space. The Quran says: O mankind, fear your guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created out of it his mate and from them twain scattered (like seed) countless men and women: Fear Allah through whom ye demand your mutual rights and be heedful of the wombs that bore you.(Surat 4.1)

As directed by Nowrasteh , who wrote the leaden script with his wife Betsy, Giffen Nowrasteh ,*The Stoning of Soraya* has a neocons sense of good and evil, which could politely be called 'moral clarity' but is more accurately described as narrow, tone deaf and thoroughly banal.

The mob violence is seen clearly as the whole village turn to craven stupidity into to fascist brutality. The film shot elegantly in colour but with the dramatic feel of black and white functions as a parable of power abused by the multitude. We see how the whole village prepares for the stoning. Men were engaged in digging the hole and guarding the victim, boys were busy with collecting the sharp stones where as the helpless women folk were immersed in silent prayer. In the last scene Soraya is drenched in blood and crumpled on the ground, mutilated face partially obscured by a mass of dark hair. Her beastial husband Ali bends to examine her face, and recoils that the bitch is still alive and then there is a roar of fury and the crowd close in. It is the gut wrenching finale to a deeply shocking film. Soraya's body dropped by the riverbank knocks the human consciousness of justice and compassion. She is abandoned by all.

History repeats again and again with women..... The outraged cry of Soraya and the sparkling of her eyes is now reflected in the eyes of Rayhanneh Jabbari who was executed for killing her alleged assailant on October 25<sup>th</sup> 2014 in Iran, even though there was a global campaign to stop it. When Morteza Abdolali Sarbandi tried to rape Rayhanneh who was an interior decorater, she stabbed him and fled the scene leaving him to bleed to death. The lives of Soraya, Rayhanneh and a quite number of other unknown souls, have become the real sacrificial lambs and still is continuing.... Should this history get continued? The nature of post-modern experience – fragmented, marginalized, situational and self-referential – has created a literary-social-political environment in which a number of voices have been muted with silence, the sole voice of the silenced. If ever the suffering of Soraya should have an influence in our present society it is we each one of us who hear the story, who feel with her, who has to take the turn. It is not the people but the evil in them that should be demolished. Woman must shatter and shackle the chains that have confined them so far and comes out openly against the forces of oppression. The search for space should have the power to withstand the devastating flurries of empirical society. The new creative roles of women as the 'pacemaker and the peacemaker of the society' should be accomplished through the collaboration of various women empowerment movements.

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