

## KITCHEN AND POWER: MIDDLE CLASS MUSLIM WOMEN'S IDENTITY AND POWER

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**Abstract:** This paper tries to argue just the opposite of common notion that women is repressed and Muslim women is doubly repressed, first for being a woman and second, for being a minority, especially a Muslim minority in India.

Kitchen is the place where and from where a Muslim woman rules. She has her identity as the matriarch of the family. Though patriarchy is the norm in India and Muslim community, it is to be proved here that Muslim woman dominates in disguise. Patriarchy is manifested. However, latently it is the kitchen which gives power and identity to the middle class Muslim woman. The power relations around food reflect the power of sexes in general. However, this paper tries to explore and to a certain extent prove that Muslim women gain their power through kitchen and the allocation and supply of food and stuff in a smart way. Such power is seen generations over generations. It is to see whether such power is passed to daughters or daughters-in-law.

**Keywords:** Dominating Muslim Women, Kitchen Politics, and Power Relations around food.

**Introduction:** The symbolism of sexual patterns certainly seems to reflect society's hierarchy and power allocation in the Muslim order, opines Fatema Mernissi. She continues by saying that strict spatial boundaries divide Muslim societies into two sub-universes, one that of men (the world of religion and power) and the other is the universe of women (the domestic world of sexuality and the family). [1] The division is based on the physical separation of the male space (the public sphere) from the female space or the domestic space (the private sphere). Again, the private space has been considered to be the personal affair of each individual in other societies, especially, the western societies, in total disregard of the differentiated status of personal affairs for either sex, which is evident in Indian Muslim societies. Goody (1982) maintains that class, caste, race and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. [2] There are many important studies like that of Fatima Mernissi, Ismat Chughtai, Khalid Jawed and others that link the control of food to political and economic power. Behar (1989) discusses how women fed ensorcelled food to husbands to tame their abusive behavior. This was written in context of 18<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. [3].

Today, one can never speak of the public and private sphere within modern society as exclusive domains of either sex. However, middle class Muslim society and otherwise has a clear demarcation of the public and the private sphere. We have a tendency to look at Muslim society through the lens of Islam and its ideology. However, Muslim society exists through its institutions, through the traditions and culture that exists among Muslims of a particular area. True that Muslims follow the holy book Quran and the traditions of the prophet, the Hadiths. However, that is not the whole story. Most Muslims achieve their

identity by not approaching their faith through the book, but by following their older generations.

Cultural diversity among Muslims-including attitudes, habits, languages and traditions-and a non-uniform diffusion of Islam over the centuries has resulted in a variety of Muslim laws and customary practices within Muslim communities in India. There is a general notion that Muslim law influences the Muslim family and Shariah (the set of rules derived from both the Holy Quran and the authentic traditions (Sunnah) of the Prophet and the scholarly opinions (Ijtehad) based on Quran and Sunnah. This implies that Muslim families and communities are, in some way, uniquely different from non-Muslims.

The wide variety of customary practices indicates that Muslim communities have either discarded strict adherence to the Shariah or reconciled customary practices with it. By doing so, they have preserved a Muslim identity, which is in consonance with and closer to the dominant (i.e. Hindu) culture. Such a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultural practices is distinctive feature of Indian composite culture and believes in the notion that solely Islam defines Muslim communities or Muslim women's status in those communities. Social analysts have noted that society is a structure made up of families and that the peculiarity of a given society can be described by outlining its familial relationships. Family relations and obligations are crucial in order to understand social processes. The basic family unit is an environment of cooperation between a man and a woman and the domain of the child's earliest upbringing.

A family is the basic structural unit of any society. Society is defined as the social system made up of inter-related and inter-dependent institutions, such as family, education, work, religion and law. Gordon Marshall, a sociologist, defined a family as:

"An intimate domestic group made up of people related to one another by bonds of blood, sexual mating or legal ties. It has been a very resilient social unit that has survived and adapted through time." [4]. Akbar S.Ahmed maintains that the central institution of Muslim society is the family. He continues by saying that in the West, the Muslim family structure is often seen as oppressive and backward, an obstacle to modernity. However, he argues that each Muslim individual member plays an equally significant role in his or her own capacity which is related to the other members of the family. Each person is special and yet different. [5]. It is the difference that ensures the balance and harmony. For Muslims, then, the family is the central institution; it is at the centre both of theology and sociology: 'The family is a divinely-inspired institution that came into existence with the creation of man. The human race is a product of this institution and not the other way round'. About a third of the legal injunctions in the Qur'an deal with family matters. These aim to produce the attitudes and behaviour patterns that Islam wants to foster in society. And they cover different generations: a Muslim family is a joint and/or extended family, normally with three or four generations within its circle. Joint family, according to Irawati Karve, is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common family worship and are related to each other as some type of kindred. [6]. While K.M. Kapadia is of the opinion that joint family is a group formed not only of a couple and their children, but also other relations either from father's side or from mother's side depending on whether the joint family is patrilineal or matrilineal." [7].

According to the Islamic principles, a family comes into being through the institution of marriage and then children. Islam differentiates between human equality and functional equality of man and woman. As for the functional equality, it takes into consideration, their essential biological differences and determines their functional spheres accordingly. Men, biologically speaking, have greater physical strength. That is why man has been given the responsibility of being a woman's protector in conjugal life and otherwise. The Islamic principle brings into existence not a male dominated system but a male-headed responsibility system based on a clear-cut idea of the division of labor. Islam, in that way, seems not patriarchal, but male-centric. Muslims abide by the Islamic norms of family and household. It is in their psyche that a woman has to look after the kitchen and children when the man is out for search for food or earn the bread. Islam considers man and woman as equal as human beings but not identical. It would be injustice to women if

they are regarded identical to men. They are the future mothers. The rearing and nurturing of a child depends on the mother. It would be an extra burden on her if she reproduces off springs and at the same time go out and search for work or food. She can at best handle the kitchen where she does not have to go out. All other manual and hard works should be done by the men whether it is private or public realm. Such division of labor is worked out in Muslim societies. Some scholars would say that women are not paid for their work. Margaret Benston regarded women's reproductive process and rearing children as reproduction of cheap labor. [8]. Muslim women, however, feel it as a blessing from Allah and that their son's or husband's money comes directly to their hands. They then decide the allocation of financial resources as they deem fit. Hence, they are doubly benefitted. Times have changed now. But nothing much has changed for a middle-class north Indian Muslim woman. Those who are working in public sphere these days might have to go through stress due to double shifting, one at domestic sphere and the other at outside. However, this takes another research altogether and needs to be explored some other time.

**The Kitchen:** There are many important studies that link the control of food to political and economic power. According to Urdu writer Khalid Jawed, the kitchen is a dangerous place and women have the sole authority over it. He writes,

"Baawarchikhana chahe ghar ke kisi bhi hisse mein ho ya Kisi bhi rukh per bana hua, chahe vaastushastra walon se kitni hi madad kyun na le li jaye, wahaan ke ladaai jhagde nahin jaate. Bawarchikhaana ek maidan-e-jung hai aur poore ghar, poore khaandaan balke bani Nau-e-Adam ki qismat ka faisla isi chhote se aur bazaahir paak-saaf maqaam se hi hota hai. Adalat yahin lagti hai, muqaddama yahin chalaya jaata hai. Aur poora ghar apni khamosh aankhon se ye tamasha dekhta hai jab tak ke aakhir wo khandar na ban jaye. Insaani aanton ki bhuk aur do waqt ki roti mein ek pur asraar aur bhayanak sehwat chhupi rehti hai...Jiske nashe ke zere asar kaali, peeli aur gori aurtein, garam bartanon ko apne sunn hathaon se uthate rehne ki aadi hokar baawarchikhaane ke bartanon se wahi sulook karne lagti hain jo wo apne mardon se karti hain. Unke mard. Ahista ahista chhote bade bartanon mein tabdeel hone lagte hain. Bawarchikhaane mein wo sab behad haavi aur khudgharz ho jaati hain." [9]

(May the kitchen be in any part of the house, built in any direction, built with the help of vaastu shastra [10] the quarrel of that place does not fade away. That the kitchen is a battle-field and the decisions of not only the household and the clan but also the fate of the whole mankind is taken at this sacred place. The court is established here, the case is fought here. And

the whole house witness the play until it turns into ruins. There is a dangerous and mysterious lust hidden in man's hunger of intestines [11]the effect of this lust ends in treating the utensils of the kitchen the same way as women- dark, pale or fair fed up handling hot utensils with their numb hands, handle the man of their household.)

Kitchen is not all about storing food, preparing food and serving it. It is also a way of giving a message. This makes kitchen a very important political tool. This reminds me of the Indian myth where Ganesha, the son of Lord Shiva, is described as elephant-headed, pot-bellied who is fond of laddoos, the traditional Indian sweet. Once Kubera, the king of Yakshas invited him for food as he believed how Shiva, an ascetic, could feed such a son. Ganesha accepted the invitation and ate all the food that was served and even asked for more. Kubera used all his money from the treasury and still could not satisfy Ganesha's hunger. Finally, Kubera fell at Ganesha's feet and begged him to stop eating. Ganesha then replied with a smile, "Any attempt to satisfy hunger will never be successful. My father, Shiva, therefore, seeks to outgrow it." 'Hunger', here, is used as a metaphor. The woman in the kitchen decides what to offer a man and other family members and how it works. She may decide not to cook. She might decide to add some aphrodisiacs to the food as the need be. Shiva once told his wife, Shakti that it does not matter what you serve and how you serve but why you serve it.

This reminds me of Ismat Chughtai's autobiographical work where her mother advises her to behave like a girl and do all the works typically done by girls in Muslim households. While Ismat was boyish, she recounts what her mother said and that is, "From the start, she'd (Ismat's mother) say, make a boy so dependent on you that he feels embarrassed to sew his own button and would die of shame if he has to prepare his own meal. Do all the small chores that a servant can do, bear with his injustices with quiet self-abasement so he eventually feels remorseful and falls at your feet to ask for forgiveness!" [12]

Remembering yet another incident of her childhood, she says before her elder sisters got married, they were the ones who ran the household. They were in charge of the keys to the store-room, they stitched all the clothes, and for that reason, her brothers did not mind being ruled by them. The idea of 'key' is very important in a Muslim household- the key to the store room, the key of the kitchen, the key of the cash-drawers and above all the key of the house. Even Fatema Mernissi maintains,

"The symbol of that power is the key to the storage room where staples and food are kept. The person who has the key is the one who decides what and when to eat". [13]

This shows how they are ingrained from the very beginning to rule, and not to be ruled. Goffman too identified several variables in the power structure of totalitarian institutions and one of them seems apt here and that is, that the managers of the institutions make it impossible for the managed to obtain simple everyday things such as cigarettes or a cup of tea or coffee without submitting to the humiliating process of soliciting permission. [14] Women make important decisions within the domestic sphere, women's interests often coincide, there is high cooperation between female and kin, and strategies of recruitment are similar for both men and women. Women's strategies also focus on 'economic' activities like the exchange of goods and services among a network of kin.

Khalid Jawed again writes that the kitchen runs parallel to the other activities of the house. The man of the house is not concerned with the kitchen. It has a space of its own and women dominate it. Man has no say in it. Woman has a tendency to own-be it things or people. She cannot let them go-be it her gold, her man or her son. Imam Ghazali, according to Fatima Mernissi, sees the woman's power as the most destructive element in the Muslim social order. She writes,

"The implicit theory of female sexuality, as seen in Imam Ghazali's interpretation of the Koran, casts the woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim. The two theories (the explicit and the implicit) have one component in common, the woman's qaid power ('the power to deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue')." [15]

Within women's own politics of private-public sphere, kitchen is assumed the centre-stage. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali [16] writes all their meals being served on the floor, where dusthakhawns (table-cloths we should call them) are spread, but neither knives, forks, spoons, glasses, nor napkins, so essential to the comfortable enjoyment of a meal amongst Europeans. But those who never knew such comforts have no desire for the indulgence, nor taste to appreciate them. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, who was a European and Christian, again writes about the women in the zenana in her only book that at first she pitied the apparent monotony of their lives; but the feeling has worn away by intimacy with the people, who are thus precluded from mixing generally with the world. They are happy in their confinement; and never having felt the sweets of liberty, would not know how to use the boon if it were to be granted them. As the bird from the nest immured in a cage is both cheerful and contented, so are these females. I must here clear that the zenana is the part of a house which is confined for the women only. It is segregated from the mardana, which a

man's domain. The literal meaning of the word Zenana means 'of the women' or 'pertaining to women'. The word is derived from Persian words, 'zen' meaning women and 'ana' meaning 'place'. [17]. She continues,

"To ladies accustomed from infancy to confinement this is by no means irksome; they have their employments and their amusements, and though these are not exactly to our taste, nor suited to our mode of education, they are not the less relished by those for whom they were invented. They perhaps wonder equally at some of our modes of dissipating time, and fancy we might spend it more profitably. Be that as it may, the Mussulmaun ladies, with whom I have been long intimate, appear to me always happy, contented, and satisfied with the seclusion to which they were born... besides which, they would deem it disgraceful in the highest degree to mix indiscriminately with men who are not relations."

In the movie, Mammo, Faiyyazi (Surekha Sikri) is usually seen bent over the kitchen gas, preparing tea and meals, and doing all household chores in a silent way. She, however, is scared of Mammo's indulgence in the kitchen as the kid (Faiyazzi's grandson who she brought up singlehandedly) was growing fond of Mammo and getting hold of the kitchen would mean taking away the power from her which she was singlehandedly pursuing. One Indian myth says that one of the protagonists of the epic Mahabharata, Kunti-the mother of Pandavas, never shared her kitchen-secrets with her daughter-in-law, Draupadi-another protagonist of the Mahabharata. There was a tug-of-war between the mother-in-law and daughter in law to rule over the kitchen win over the Pandavas. Finally, Draupadi excelled in making more delicious food than Kunti and won the hearts of her five husbands. When Pandavas were forced to exile by their cousins, Kauravas, Draupadi's greatest regret was that she lost her kitchen and the power to feed many of them who came to her door. Yet another myth of abducting the protagonist, Sita, of the epic Ramayana by Ravan is that some crow came and took away the bread made by Sita and dropped it at Ravana's kingdom, Lanka. Ravana happened to eat that bread and he liked it so much that he planned to abduct the one who made it.

While Nancy Friday is of the opinion that women have been reared under an ideal of womanhood, which is outdated and restrictive, and largely unrepresentative of women's true inner lives; Muslim women's lives and rearing seems to be otherwise. Their inner lives are never outdated. They celebrate womanhood and know how to use it as a weapon in times of need.

Practically, the family is the most significant social unit. So the private and not the public sector is the sphere in which the relative attribution of power to

males and females is of the greatest real importance. [18]. In Muslim societies, the public and private spheres are institutionally separated but are mutually interdependent. Chughtai writes,

"Patience, prudence, wisdom and social graces- these will make a man dependant on a woman." [Ismat Chughtai's A life in Words: Memoirs, (translated by M.Asaduddin) p.9-10]

"A daughter is taught manners and etiquette by her mother, and how to keep the husband under her thumb, how to pull down the in-laws cleverly, how to support one's brothers at every step." (ibid., p.80) . As Gail Minault observes,

"The ideal of purdah society was one of hermetically sealed respectability: the woman left her father's house only when carried out in a wedding palanquin, and left her husband's house only when carried out on her bier. But the realities of purdah existence were considerably more sociable. Women spent a great deal of time on their rooftops, conversing from one house to another; they visited one another frequently within their neighborhood or circle of relations, and shared food on festival occasions with a whole network of families, bound together by ties of blood or social and economic obligations. A bride returned to her natal home frequently during the early months of her marriage, and then for the birth of her first child, and possibly for later confinements. Sisters, in particular, remained in close contact, whatever the vicissitudes of their married lives. Women's networks were largely responsible for the arranging of marriages, even though the formal negotiations of a marriage contract were the prerogative of men." [19]

Most of the times, in Muslim societies, the strongest ties are among mother, daughter and sister, who form a triad of solidarity to the point that one may act or speak for all.

I must say Muslim women are actively passive. They lower their gaze, they lower their voices, they dress up nicely for their husbands, they take small step, and they belittle themselves in front of the elderly females and especially the males and hence, gracefully and cunningly win the game. The desire to lead and control the other is natural, exclusive to neither sex. Only the ways are different and I believe women are far better at it. I do not say the idea of domination is consciously going on in a women's mind, I am just saying that Muslim women is bred in a way that she handles things in a particular way and becomes the winner.

As it is said one has to keep someone over her head to bring him down. A woman becomes a matriarch once she ages. In the kitchen and zenana hierarchy, the mother and mother-in-law are the strongest, then comes the daughter, then the sister and at last the daughter-in-law.

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10. Vaastu Shastra is a traditional Hindu system of architecture. These are texts found in the Indian subcontinent that describe principles of design, layout, measurements, ground preparation, space arrangement and spatial geometry. Some architects considered it superstitious while some others state that most of the text is about flexible design guidelines for space, sunlight, flow and function.
11. Khalid Jawed, here, writes 'intestines' in place of stomach because his primary concern is the formation of a novel. His diction is symbolic.
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