



CHALLENGING TRADITIONS: CONTEMPORARINESS AND CULTURAL TRANSITIONS IN HAIDER'S *HOW IT HAPPENED*

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ABSTRACT

The focus on the younger generation challenging established cultural norms is a common aspect in many contemporary books and films. The projection of the traditional beliefs and practices of a society is looked at in a critical manner by these authors from the perspective of the youth. Pakistani writer, Shajaf Fatima Haider, in her debut novel, How It Happened, focuses on the contemporary scenario in modern day Pakistan where traditional norms related to the conduct of marriages are challenged by the younger generation. This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural transitions in a society where established practices are found outdated by the youth. The paper also looks at the status of women in such a society where the clash between the old and the new comes to surface. The living representative of the old culture, the family's matriarch, Dadi, tries her best to keep up the traditions of the past alive. This 'glorious' past reveals a time when the women were nothing less than mere puppets and their entire existence depended on how admirable they would prove to be in the marriage market. This paper takes up this particular issue and critically looks at the portrayal of such situation for women vis-à-vis the contemporary times when things have taken a different turn. Attempt has been made to understand the way the author presents the cultural transitions in a society where the status of women has undergone drastic changes but there still remain traces of the past engraved in the way of life.

Keywords: traditions, culture, modernity, marriage, sectarianism, younger generation, matriarch, family

It has been a subject of great interest to scholars worldwide to study the cultural traditions of various societies while focusing on how such cultural practices are challenged by the younger generation from time to time. Cultural traditions or practices of a society, in broad terms, imply the manifestation of a culture, especially with regard to the traditional and customary practices of a particular ethnic or cultural group. Such cultural practices are generally regarded as the identifiers of a group or section of the society. The rituals and customs related



to marriage in a society form an integral part of the cultural practices of that group. Several contemporary authors and film makers have focused on the impact of such cultural practices on the younger generation and the resultant rebellion against traditional norms. Chetan Bhagat is one such Indian author who focuses on the impact of traditional cultural practices on the youth. His novels, made into successful movies, have highlighted the cultural transitions in today's times and the way the Gen Y challenges the traditional and established norms of the society. It makes an interesting study to note such similar scenarios in the societies of other countries as well. Every country has its own traditions and practices and an understanding of the reaction of the youth to such culture is useful to explore similar situations in the native contexts.

Shazaf Fatima Haider is a contemporary Pakistani writer who has shot into fame post publication of her debut novel, *How It Happened*, in 2012. Her book has been well-received in many countries for her humorous portrayal of the clash of tradition and modernity in a Pakistani family. Her book portrays a contemporary Pakistani society, where the continuous tug of war between the old and the new is at play. The plot revolves around a conservative Shia Bandian family and the tumult that the members go through when the younger generation decide to have their say in marriages, which so far had been administered only by the overzealous matriarch of the house. This paper highlights Haider's attempt at providing a scathing indictment at many time-honoured traditions of the society – marriages and how they are conducted, women's position in the society, dowry, sectarianism and many more. Narrated by the youngest member of the household, Saleha, the readers are captivated with the stories of how the marriages of Haroon, the obedient elder son, and Zeba, the rebellious daughter, were conducted. Haider's choice of tantalising titles of the different chapters of her book leaves the readers curious till the end. Throughout the book, chapters titled as 'How a Phone Call Created Complications', 'How We Were Shaken Up by a Whirlwind Intervention', 'How Dadi Extracted a Proposal Just in Time' and so on serve the purpose of building up the readers' interest, while dividing the novel into fascinating chunks.

Haider presents the old Bhakuraj traditions in the words of Dadi, who time and again remind her grandchildren of the correct Islamic ways of getting married. As Saleha states, the matriarch chose to repeat the tale of her marriage innumerable times "...because it illustrated a philosophy she had ingrained in her daughter and her daughter's daughters: there was greater romance in arranged marriages than in the irrational immorality of love marriages. We were therefore to rely on the elders of our family for the management of all proposals, never taking matters into our own hands." (HIH, 7) Taking her grandchildren continuously to the earlier times, Dadi reflected on the cultural traditions and practices which were regarded as time-honoured and the only ways of decent living.

Haider's novel introduces us to the unrest that can occur in well-furnished Pakistani living rooms when it comes to young people choosing their own life partners. The family Haider



has written is an ultraconservative Shia Bandian one. As the overzealous matriarch, Dadi, races to get her grandchildren bound by the ties of arranged matrimony; the readers get a glimpse of how the family reacts and responds at the supposed to be ‘unholy’ union of a Shia girl and a Sunni doctor. As the sub-title of the book, “The Story of an Arranged Marriage Based on Many, Many True Stories...” suggest, the marriage of the rebellious Zeba portray the battle between the old and the new, the established tradition of conducting marriages and the challenges brought forth to such system by the younger generation. Zeba, who is a handful for her grandmother, is seen as the rebellious one “displaying disconcerting signs of independence” which includes “wearing a sleeveless kameez and then going out to a restaurant for dinner with a group of friends.” (HIH, 35) Trying to bring her spoilt granddaughter to the right track, Dadi recounts innumerable tales of the past where women led a puppet-like life deemed to be the most appropriate one. One such tale with the suggested moral for Zeba goes like this:

“My poor sister, Khanum, may she rest in peace. Abba Huzoor came home one day and told her she would marry a young lecturer who taught with him at Patna University. She bowed her head and said, “Jee acha, Abba Huzoor.” Did you hear that Zeba? That’s how good girls respond to their parents. They trust their elders to do what is best.” (HIH, 35)

Haider’s book portrays a culture in transition; the clash between the past when people were “betrothed even before birth” (HIH, 36) and the modern times when youngsters want to have a say in everything which concerns them. A study on cultural discourses and beliefs in South Asian communities highlight that patriarchal notions about gender roles have evolved from a number of inter-related discourses held despite changing social contexts. Such notions about gender roles include the ideas that – “Sons are more important than daughters; man is the woman’s protector; the ideal wife must obey her husband, be loyal, devoted and chaste; children must obey parents and be dutiful towards them at all times; and woman’s primary role is towards the family and household.” (Shankar, Das, Atwal) Haider’s book highlights most of these accepted notions of the past and presents the relative importance of such discourses in contemporary times.

As the story progresses, the author’s main intention to portray a world of changing realities becomes clear; the constant tug-of-war between the old and the new comes to the forefront. Most of these traditional ideas in the present-day times are confused ones, of the utmost desire to keep up the orthodox ways and yet to show a liberal-mindedness: a suitable girl “should not cover her head or wear a ‘burqa’ like a fundo. Neither should be so liberal that we are forced to stare at her cleavage all day long.” (HIH, 33) Haider’s depiction of the changed world is mainly through her women characters, Fati Phupps, who refuses to leave a life of blessed spinsterhood, writes for a magazine and lives an independent life; Saima represents a woman’s ability to work in a man’s world and Zeba, who reads *Pride and Prejudice*, talks of orgasms, discusses politics and dates a Sunni man.



The author depicts tradition in the form of the ‘grande dame’ of the household, Dadi, and her nostalgic recollections of the ancestors of Bhakuraj. Dadi’s countless tales of Bhakuraj, the family’s ancestral village, to her grandchildren serve as continuous reminders to them on ways of life and ways to get married according to tradition. A staunch believer of old ways, Dadi expects complete obedience from her grandchildren in matters related to marriage so that no one in her family falls prey to “mordren” times and spoils the name of the Bandian clan.

Haider’s story is set to expose contemporary Pakistani society where tradition struggles to reconcile with changing times, where marriages are not always arranged and women may not be well versed in the arts of cooking and sewing. Dadi is fed up with these “mordren” times and her favourite method of countering them is through nostalgic recollections of tales of her ancestors that she modifies according to the lesson she wants to dispense at a particular point. Her tales of Bhakuraj, the family’s ancestral village, serve as a guide to the lives she wants her grandchildren to live. Haider actually includes a hilarious checklist against which all prospective girls for her grandson are measured even though Dadi is incredulous at being told she’s being picky. The checklist, seemingly humorous, depicts the patriarchal mindset of the society. For instance, the list includes that the girl must be “qualified to get a job” but “she must not want to get a job. What are men for?” (HIH, 32) The patriarchal viewpoint is further brought about in the listing of the necessary qualifications required to approve the prospective girl which focus a lot on physical requirements like “long, silky hair”; well-endowed but not fat; and being “dazzlingly fair”. (HIH, 33) However, under the façade of the humor, Dadi’s checklist is “...a social commentary on the traditions and culture that consider women as nothing more than a commodity to be sold at the time of marriage for the best price.” (Aggarwal)

What is important to note is that Haider takes no sides. Arranged isn’t necessarily bad and marrying for love may lead to being disowned by one’s loved ones. Like Saleha, the narrator, we must draw our own conclusions. Narrated by the wide-eyed youngest member of the family, the fifteen year old Saleha, we are introduced to the two routes by which marriages can be conducted. Haroon, the obedient elder brother goes through the ritual of seeing innumerable girls until he finally proposes to a co-worker. Even this slight deviation from tradition upsets Dadi but she accepts it because at least the girl in question is Shia. The real trouble begins with Zeba, the elder daughter of the household, who as our narrator observes, is her generation’s heroine and the previous generation’s nightmare. She not only dares to stay unmarried until the alarming age of twenty-five, but also engages in “dating-shating” a Sunni boy.

How It Happened may be a scathing indictment of the way even educated families parade their girls like cattle, but this is where the author has the last laugh. Haider takes on the many roles that a woman may come to play during the course of her life — whether as a mother,



mother-in-law, wife or even aunt — and portrays irony through their perceptions and actions. Dadi considers the purpose of a woman to be restricted to bearing sons but refuses to bow down before fierce opposition to the traditions she so passionately advocates. It is the women in the novel who stand up for their beliefs even when at risk of censure or scandal. Fati Phups refuses to leave a life of blessed spinsterhood whereas Haroon's wife, Saima, represents a woman's ability to work in a man's world. And Zeba of course won't settle for a marriage that isn't for "pleasure-shleasure".

Haider also explores the idea that in the traditional set-up, when you marry someone, you also marry his or her family. Haroon's marriage to Saima affects the women in the family in strange ways that even they had not predicted. Sharing Haroon with his new wife is difficult for his mother and especially his grandmother. Even Saleha, who starts out as Saima Apa's biggest fan, confesses that she never actually considered her 'real' family. With this observation, Haider brings to light an important observation that in a joint family set-up, it is difficult to predict one's reaction in complicated situations beforehand.

Haider's book portrays many serious issues as well. The girl-viewing for Haroon brings to light certain evil practices prevalent even in contemporary society. A sixteen yearold girl is presented to Haroon as a potential wife and even though the Bandians have the decency to reject the match, we learn that she is married off to a very old man anyway. Saleha, who is just fifteen, receives a proposal for marriage from the brother of one of the prospective girls for Haroon. Saleha, who has an innocent crush on her French teacher, is convinced that she is going to hell for having such a pervert desire for one who is like her parent. Haider also focuses on other serious matters like dowry, segregation and sectarianism.

The world of opposites is further carried forward by Haider's ability to juxtapose the serious and the humorous. Amidst many funny situations, hilarious character sketches and a language which is simple and yet humorous draw the readers' attention. Haider is able to create many other characters who have a lasting impression on our minds — Dadi's cousin and the only living member of the Bandian clan of her generation, her arch-rival, Qurrat Dadi with her philosophy of a greater romance in arranged marriages than in the irrational immortality of love marriages. The most hilarious and lively scenes in the book are the catfights between Dadi and her arch-rival as pinching sentences are delivered between the two betel-leaf chewers.

How It Happened is definitely not a treatise on arranged versus love marriage or an exposition on the differences between the beliefs and customs of two generations — rather it is a book where the author presents certain serious issues in a humorous vein without taking any sides. Nevertheless, Haider's book portrays the challenges brought forth by the younger generation towards established norms of the society and thus, presents a culture in transition.



NOTES

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