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Caught in A Cultural Flux: Immigrant Muslim Women in Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box*

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As an epistemological category of analysis, diaspora cannot remain separated and distinct from the intersectionality of class, race, gender and sexuality (Farahani 118). In considering the diasporic experience of Muslim women, which constitutes the major thematic concerns of fictional works written particularly since the last decade of the 20th century, religion emerges as another significant co-ordinate alongwith class, race, genderand sexuality. This paper examines how in Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box*the Pakistani immigrants in England negotiate their religious identity and accommodate to or feel constrained by visible Islamic symbols like the purdah (veil).

Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box* charts the identity travails of three sets of Pakistani women in England belonging to two generations – Raisa, Tahira and Nasreen and their mothers Sabah Ahmed, Nargis Rashid and BulquisEhsan. Raisa is a teacher engaged in a research project about the identity and value systems of British Muslim immigrant women –how they live, how they have become who they are, what they think is important, what they suffer and how they fight back. During the course of her research Raisa finds herself drawn into the lives of her 'subjects', Tahira and Nasreen, fifteen-year-old students. Raisa's research is less an academic exercise than an exploration of her own identity – a single, wealthy woman whose independence and upper class status mark her off from her working class 'subjects'. Raisa, who was seven, when she left her home in Lahore for London, in 1961, has now turned thirty-one. So the year is 1985.

Symbols of Islamic identity, the purdah for example, assume particular significance for a Muslim community residing in an alien environment. The contours of the purdah in *The Red Box* are to be outlined in the light of the immigrant status of its Muslim women characters. While the first-generation women create their own cultural space and guard it zealously against the onslaughts of the host culture, their daughters find themselves increasingly caught between the conflicting pulls and drives of their parent and host cultures. An accommodation to the purdah – deference to the family, conformity to tradition and the emphasis on sexual morality and sex segregation being its implicit features – is an ideal enshrined in their parent culture. The pressure to conform to the ideal is greater on the woman, who is regarded as the repository of the Islamic tradition and the transmitter of its values.

The journey undertaken by the first-generation women in *The Red Box* is from the closed Muslim society of Pakistan to the freedom (though largely illusory) of the West. Consequently, there is a broadening of the physical and mental spaces for them and their daughters. All the mothers participate in the labour force, though it is out of compulsion rather than as a matter of choice. The importance of education is stressed in all the three families. Raisa's father always upheld the pursuit of knowledge as the Islamic ideal. "Seek knowledge, though it be at the ends of the earth". These had been the Prophet's sentiments [...]" (RB 83). Nargis Rashid, who had to drop her studies early, wants her "children to study, pass exams and learn things [...]" (RB 144). Nasreen's parents also attach much significance to the education of their children. In fact, as Tahira's mother puts it, the poorer they are, the more important

education is, without which they have no hope of survival in the racially discriminatory environment they inhabit.

The physical world opens up; the mental horizons expand. Nevertheless, the boundaries of the immigrant women's moral space are strictly demarcated by their family, community and religion. " 'All sorts of things control your behaviour, all sorts of things' " (RB 207). Going to discos and parties is against the dictates of their religion and culture and hence forbidden for Tahira and Nasreen. Raisa too, during her student life in the 1960s, was subjected to similar restrictions. Her friendship with English girls like Helen, her galling about, aping Western ways, frequent trips to the Roundhouse – "a place where a boy smoked pot, drank alcohol, took off his clothes and danced naked for all to see" – and returning home late at night all invited the disapproval of her conservative mother (RB 198). Raisa's mother pulls up her husband for letting Raisa imbibe the Western life-style. Tahira cannot go swimming or have her hair cut. She has to wear the *shalwarkameez* and *dupatta* in deference to her mother's wishes but being seen in these "night clothes" by her English schoolmates is humiliating for her (RB 14). On the other hand, Sabah Ahmed, who has to discard her indigenous dress and put on Western clothes, goaded by her liberal-minded husband, does not want to be recognised in this dress by her *desi* friends. For these women, larger questions of identity and culture are involved in the simple act of choosing a dress. The conflict of cultures works differently for the women of the old and the new generations. For the former, the *desi* dress is a symbol of their cultural distinctiveness as Pakistani Muslims, but for the latter, it highlights their secondary status as the loathsome and despicable 'Pakis'.

Purdah in *The Red Box* also operates on the symbolic level of the racial divide between the white English and the brown *desis*. The segregation along racial lines serves as a community purdah, the immigrant Asian community being demarcated by its dress, colour, religion and language (Jain226). Like sex segregation, racial segregation too is asymmetrical. The Asians are ostracized and humiliated, their rights curtailed, opportunities robbed. The law is discriminatory. It is an institutionalised form of racism that the Asians have to encounter. The whole South Park School is racist. The teachers merely look on when all the Asian students are locked up by the white students. The Asian girls cannot report the insults by the whites because the teachers will not believe them. There are instances of the houses of Asian students being set ablaze and their families burnt alive, but nothing is done. However, if it had been a white man's house "they would have caught someone quick" (RB 17). Filthy, abusive remarks are hurled at them when Tahira and Mumtaz walk along the street. A group of youth call them "dirty paki slags" (RB 53). Even Tahira's mother is spat at while she is returning home from work. Jamshed is expelled from school for carrying a knife. Terry, an English boy, also carries a knife, but he goes scot-free. When racial prejudice and hatred run deep, the prospects remain bleak for all the Asian girls, no matter whether they are rich or poor. Raisa is denied the expected job. Nasreen realizes that she would not be able to do well in spite of her hard work and thorough knowledge of the syllabus.

For the Muslim community in *The Red Box* "the pressure to preserve *izzat* increased by the fact of living in the midst of a different culture" particularly because "that culture is perceived as both seductive and immoral" (Williams 49). Families exercise greater control over the mobility of girls lest they should develop liaisons with English boys thereby threatening their *izzat*. Mrs Ehsan has high regard for her *izzat*. She prefers working in the privacy and security of her home to factory labour. The 'invisibility' conferred by informal labour is embraced, despite the notoriously low wages offered. Little does she realize that she has no safeguard against economic exploitation by the employer or no claim to labour rights.

The preservation of honour becomes burdensome for a woman devoid of male protection. As a divorcee Nargis is excessively prone to slander; the behaviour of her children is a cause of constant anxiety for her. "They don't understand the dangers in this country, and they don't care that people talk, and their name becomes bad" (RB 147). She personally might not believe in shackling her daughter's life but has to oblige her relatives who sneak on Tahira. She makes her daughter wear the *shalwarkameez* and *dupatta*, for, she does not want her relatives to think that her upbringing of her children is not correct or Islamic.

Raisa's mother, the daughter of a rich man, has to take up the job of a seamstress in a factory to support her family. But her sense of *izzat* forces her to assume fictitious names at the workplace and keep the whole thing secret even from her children. Raisa's grandmother, Shahnawaz, is the embodiment of *izzat*. She protects her husband's and sons' as well as her own reputation by leading a life of strict seclusion. She rarely left the house, except under the watchful and protective eyes of her sons or husband. "Those who saw her veiled form rarely and briefly step from house to car were quick to recognise her moral worth" (RB204). Raisa, however, feels that deep within, she must have harboured anger and bitterness at her cloistered existence. It must have been her unarticulated longings, dissatisfaction and despair that found expression in the form of her sharp complaints about the laziness of servants or the shyness of jewellers.

Among the younger generation, Nasreen upholds the *izzat* of her family in choosing to live by the Islamic moral code. Raisa and Tahira attend disco parties on the sly but have their own insular restrictions of not drinking, smoking or taking drugs. Tahira disapproves of the idea of sex before marriage but succumbs to temptation. Raisa, on the other hand, says a strict 'no' to sexual contact with men. The adoption of a rigid moral stance becomes imperative for the preservation of honour in a strange land where the cultural identity of Muslims is in peril. But the restrictions are relaxed back home. In Islamabad we see the English-returned youth holding soirees where they smoke, drink, flirt and swap bawdy jokes. Soraya is a girl who hardly smoked in London; but in Pakistan she becomes a chain smoker. Yusuf whose sisters are hidden away in seclusion hovers round Raisa amorously and laughs the loudest at titillating jokes.

The White male manipulates the Islamic concept of *izzatto* put down Asian women's attempts at resistance. The non-compliance and/or resistance of the Asian girls are frowned upon more than that of the boys by the racist men. On the economic front too, the principle of honour is used against the non-compliant Asian women. This is illustrated by how the manager of the plug factory, where Tahira's mother formerly worked, pre-empts the Indian and Pakistani women's strike against poor wages and squalid working conditions. Arguments like "What'll your families think?" and "what would their dads and husbands think?" are used to humiliate the women and silence their protests (RB 135-36). The Pakistanis themselves try to keep the girls down lest they should get out of hand and refuse to "do what they're told in other things" thereby threatening the familial authority of the male (RB 136).

In the Islamic moral code, mixing with the opposite sex and having sexual relations outside marriage constitute the ultimate transgression. Of all the bad things a girl can commit, "sexual transgression is the worst, a cardinal crime, worse than the taking of a life" (RB 212). But as Raisa and Tahira come to discover, the application of the laws of sexual morality is not uniformly binding on men and women. "In practical terms [...] boys playing about isn't anywhere as serious as girls [...]" (RB 211). Tahira's brother Hussein enjoys greater freedom of mobility and greater opportunities for social interaction than his sister. The parents fear that the girls, if allowed free mixing, would end up marrying some English blokes. Raisa's Westernised father allows her the freedom to socialise with the opposite sex but only on a professional, an educational level. A romance is not merely forbidden; it is not even a debatable topic in parental circles.

The consequences of sexual transgression can be traumatic for the woman; the man often goes scot-free. "All the time girls get things said about them [...]" (RB 170). Fear and guilt wear down heavily on Tahira after she loses her virginity to Arif. Arif threatens her with exposure to try and force her into continuing the relationship. Coupled with Tahira's guilt is her anger caused by the realization that men do it all the time but get away with it. As Farhana Sheikh observes, though men too are forbidden by Islam from sex outside marriage, "chastity has been used historically as a means of oppressing women – a way of keeping them hidden, away from public affairs, and a way of preventing them from thinking about other things" ("Spotlight" 24).

The life of Nasreen in *The Red Box* is characterized by monotony and fettered by taboos. Her socialising is restricted to attending weddings and family functions and visiting relatives. She affirms the values of home and does not truant, go to discos or parties, flirt with boys or join any of the girlish

mischievous all others seem to be enjoying. However, her happiness and contentment in being an obedient daughter and devout Muslim seem illusory. The desire to escape the confines of her tedious life lies submerged in her psyche and finds release in her romantic-erotic fantasies. But even in her fantasies she is careful not to contravene her parents' wishes; hence she substitutes Rodrigues, the hero of her fantasies, with the more acceptable Zahid – a Westernised Muslim instead of an English man (Jain228). Also, her sense of propriety and decorum does not let her fantasies stray into anything overtly sexual (Williams 49). She has to keep away from the anti-racist student demonstration organized by fellow Asians, in deference to her parents' wish, who do not want her to skip her classes or put her life in danger by acting against the authority. She cannot get over the shame of her cowardly inaction. Her hysterical outburst – a bizarre surfacing of her stifled rage and indignation – is directed not just against her racist schoolmates but against the horde of injustices perpetrated on the defenceless and against her own passivity. When she hurls a chair at David Birch, her wrath is actually turned “at the burning of pregnant women and their children, at the pains in her mother's body and the dangers around her, at the unimportance of her jobless father, at the stabbing of a thirteen-year-old boy, at the school that couldn't stop it, at the world that silenced her, at herself for taking it all” (RB 119-20).

The Red Box also illustrates how protection by the male shades into control and exploitation. Marriage brings Sabah Khanam out of the physical purdah. Her husband takes her to public functions, teaches her French and tells her the modern interpretations of the Quran and its radical teachings on the equality of sexes. However, with all his “thick talk” about women's rights and freedom he pushes his wife into the ignominy of low-paid factory labour, which not only erases her identity but also wracks her nerves. Mr Ahmed is as much responsible for Sabah's untimely death as her brothers who cheat her out of her inheritance. Protection and control even degenerate into sexual harassment like the one to which Arif subjects Tahira (Williams 49). All the three older women in the novel are subjected to economic exploitation by the male employer. The factories where Sabah and Nargis work are run under the most inhumane and despicable conditions. They are made to work for long hours and are paid a pittance. The wages are even lower for those like MrsEhsan who work from home. Mr Khan whom MrsEhsan hails as the saviour-protector of many Pakistani women – “[...] if it wasn't for Khan Saab, none of us would have jobs” – is, in fact, a ruthless exploiter (RB 123). Nargis is a little more fortunate than many other women in Mr Khan's factory who are not even registered. Without registration Mr Khan “could pay them as little as he wanted; he could make them work for however many hours he wished; he could fire them for nothing” (RB 161). Balbir is fired before she completes two-years. As Nargis says: “It's because of the two years, and because she paid her tax that he's sacked her [...] He doesn't want to take any chances. After two years of working the law says we can fight 'unfair dismissal' ” (RB 163). Raisa's mother would have been sacked if she had lived long enough. Mr Khan resorts to divisive tactics to preclude the labourers organizing against the injustices. Though seething with indignation, retaliation is inconceivable for these women except in their dreams. Zaibie, for instance, dreams of burning the clothes and breaking the machines with the strength of a thousand men.

Islam is “a religion that liberates women, not oppresses them,” observes Farhana Sheikh. “It is not one where women are to be pushed into the hidden world, the home etc., but rather, it is very much to do with participating and empowerment” (“Spotlight” 23). However, in the dominant male interpretation, the Quranic principle of sex equality is subverted to decree domestication as the ideal for the woman. Nasreen in *The Red Box* parrots this dominant interpretation when she reads into the Quranic verse on sex equality the idea of role differentiation with the woman's role as being within the home. She naively believes that sex segregation guarantees stability in marital relationships:

Women cover their whole body so that the men can't even look, can't even think, oh she's beautiful. They have self-respect, they won't let other men see them so they go after them and bother them. It's the same with men. If they know their wife is faithful to them, and they can't see other women – their faces, the shape of their bodies – they're going to stick to their own wives as well. (RB 22-23)

“Countries may call themselves Islamic but Islamic law was rarely practised” (RB 205). Men override the equitable Islamic law of inheritance. Raisa's uncles stand united in depriving their sisters of

their rightful share of the father's property. Raisa's mother, with her access to education and modern ideas, refuses to take the injustice lying down. She also urges her acquiescent sister to hold her ground. Her barrister-husband plays an instrumental role in enhancing her legal awareness which is an essential pre-requisite for women empowerment.

The older women in *The Red Box*, with the exception of Nargis to a certain extent, and Nasreen, the second-generation girl, live by the traditional code. For Sabah, Nargis and Bulquis, England remains a foreign country despite many years of residence there. They feel alienated by its language and culture. The English dress, Sabah is compelled to wear at her husband's insistence, alienates her from her self. MrsEhsan does not speak English despite her twenty-year stay in England; Nargis too is not at home with English. They all share a desire to go back to Pakistan, which is still their home culturally. As women residing in an alien culture, there is an increased responsibility upon them to instil concepts of *adab* (appropriate behaviour) and religious values in their children, particularly daughters so that they are incorporated into the *baraadri* (clan). The women are heroic in their struggle to keep the family going. Sabah snuffs her life out working furiously at sweatshops. Nargis and Bulquis have to toil hard to keep the hearth burning.

Even the younger women, once put in responsible roles, uphold the Islamic code. Raisa has a go at her sister Atiyya for lying to her about her outing; on another occasion, urged by her father, she lectures to her cousin about the purity of the truly Islamic woman in an attempt to dissuade her from a sexual liaison. Nasreen is keen on imbibing the Islamic ideals and transmitting them to her children. " 'I'm really proud that I'm a Muslim, because I think it's a true religion, it guides anybody through life properly, and shows them what they should and shouldn't do so they do not get into trouble, and have a proper, happy life' " (RB 13).

The determination of identity is problematic for the younger women in *The Red Box*, caught up as they are in the cultural flux. Raisa and Tahira experience an identity crisis, torn between the purdah-like restrictions of their indigenous culture and the autonomy of the West. They are neither wholly English nor wholly Pakistani. "You ain't just one thing anyway" (RB 181). Whether to abide by tradition or opt for freedom depends on where one is located. Tahira does not object to spatial and moral restrictions in Pakistan because that is the norm there, to which every one conforms. But in England, keeping off discothèques would alienate the Pakistani girls from their English friends. If they don't smoke, drink or dance with the boys, they would be deemed odd. Tahira feels that standards of morality can be relaxed if the people around all do things 'bad'. She would even have run off with Arif if he had been nice to her. Besides, good and bad are relative concepts. Lots of Pakistanis, for instance, think that if one is good, one does not get divorced, without bothering to enquire the circumstances that lead to it. Raisa and Tahira do certain things that are considered bad in their parent culture, for, the fervent desire to belong to one's circle of friends overpowers the sense of obligation to one's family, community and religion. At the same time, they are beleaguered by doubts and misgivings and are, at times, even racked by guilt. Embedded in their lives are complexities beyond the reach of any research.

Farhana Sheikh underscores the need for consciousness raising and female solidarity. Raisa's research project itself is an endeavour to forge a companionship among the expatriate Muslim women who are doubly marginalized. Mutual understanding is essential if they "are to stand together against the injustices of our pasts and presents" and to change the things that hold them down (RB 190). But the disparity in social and economic status precludes an attempt at bonding. Nargis' suspicion – "Hadn't Raisa's people always used people like her?" – is confirmed by Raisa's confession that her grandfather, though a pious and generous Muslim, became enormously rich through the skilful exploitation of cheap labour in post-Partition Pakistan (RB 154).

Tahira envies Raisa's freedom and feels that the latter, on account of her wealth and upper class status, can never identify with people like her or understand their problems. Referring to her mother's work at the factory, she tells Raisa: " 'It ain't the sort of work you or anyone in your family does [...] I've been to my mum's work and helped out, and I can tell you, you wouldn't know nothing about that sort of work' " (RB145). The bitterness in her tone is caused by her firm belief that the gulf is unbridgeable. But

the fact that Raisa's mother herself worked in a factory under similar appalling conditions, something that Raisa conceals from the girls till towards the end of the novel, affirms hopes of an identification. As Raisa puts it, "the differences are there, unmistakably, but so are the points of meeting" (RB 190). That Tahira confides in Raisa about the loss of her virginity is a testimony to the emotional security and solace the relationship offers her. As she herself reflects, "the talking and those moments of closeness had become too seductive to be given up" (RB 98). In fact, Raisa had once identified herself with the English, thinking she had more in common with them than with her own compatriots like Rezwana Shah or Mariam. It is the discovery of the red box, the key to her mother's secret life, which becomes catalytical in organizing Raisa's loyalties. The red box is a metaphor for the woman's unarticulated sorrows and latent fears.

Female resistance to oppression and exploitation in *The Red Box* is individual as well as collective. A shared experience of racial oppression engenders collective resistance and reaffirms pride in one's indigenous culture. Tahira, who used to be embarrassed at being seen in *shalwarkameez* by her English friends, outside the school, gradually grows proud of her Asian dress: "It don't bother me if I wear Asian clothes now because I am who I am. First of all I was embarrassed: I'd wear trousers and I wouldn't care what my mum'd say [...] And then I said to myself – I don't care, I'll wear my clothes 'cos that's who I am, a Pakistani" (RB 17). She feels more a Pakistani when taunted by the whites. The student demonstration launched against the racist policies of the South Park School is a powerful expression of collective resistance. Tahira feels being her true self when she is part of a bigger cause. The women also relate themselves to other categories of the oppressed. Being part of a bigger thing like the PLO gives them strength. Farhana Sheikh, while emphasizing the need for collective struggle, does not lose sight of the class divisions that alienate the women from one another.

On the individual level, the women characters, young and old, develop their own modes of resistance. Nasreen's grandmother, who demonstrated against the British in India and was imprisoned by them, is a powerful model of women's resistance in the novel (Williams 52). Unlike racial/imperialist aggression, sexual harassment can be countered only on an individual plane. One cannot speak out, look for sympathy or organize protest marches. If the girl speaks out, she will be ostracized by the family for the slur she caused. Tahira asks significantly: "It ain't something I can get people to march about, is it?" (RB 94). However, she conquers her fear, learns to face up to her seducer and retaliates in his own coin – if he talks about taking her virginity, she will accuse him of rape. It is the success of the anti-racist student march that has given Tahira the courage to stand up to Arif.

Tahira's mother is another strong rebel, who fights for her rights both on the domestic front and at the workplace. She has no qualms about seeking a divorce when she realizes that it is impossible to live together. In opting for a divorce, she stands out from the majority of Pakistani women who consider divorce reprehensible. Though well aware of her own vulnerability as a factory worker, she demands better pay and safe working conditions: [...] she couldn't just stand and accept things that weren't right – she hadn't in her marriage and she shouldn't in her work" (RB 161). She also tries to make her fellow workers aware of the need for registration, so that they could claim their benefit and be insured against the injustices.

Raisa's research is also a form of resistance. It undercuts the official discourse on Pakistani women: " 'I want to show how the official and well-known descriptions of eastern women, of Pakistani women's lives, don't really describe or explain their lives' " (RB 154-55). Farhana Sheikh has received brickbats for her progressive treatment of women in *The Red Box*. She cites the case of an Indian reviewer who found the book full of 'slags and prostitutes' ("Spotlight" 24).

In an interview to Lakshmi Holmstrom, Farhana Sheikh has observed that the west suppresses the real lives of Asian women and puts about fabricated accounts of the brutal treatment of women in the East (22). It is significant that in her novel she chooses to dwell on the oppression of the Asians by the Whites. Besides, she charts the course of women's resistance, which is as much a reality as the oppression.

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