

Benazir's Refracted Images

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Abstract- This paper investigates the complexities posed by the genre of life writing and the ramifications it has on formulation of history through a detailed analysis of Benazir Bhutto's autobiography, *The Daughter of the East*. The book has been publicised as a "historical document of uncommon passion and courage" and is a first person narrative of Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister. The personal and the political are intertwined in such a manner in the book that there is a constant blurring between the subjective individual memory and the collective history that an entire nation shares in. The following study attempts to delineate the narrative strategies used by the author to bring about the same. It further discusses the role that market plays in shaping of the genre of autobiography.

Key Words: Benazir Bhutto, Refracted Images

"I have always believed in the importance of historic record"¹ states Benazir Bhutto, Islam's first elected woman Prime Minister. However, the autobiographical form chosen by her is neither the finest source of history, nor a neutral one. Autobiography has socio-political functions that far exceed historiography. It is a "polygenre"² that proceeds from cultural locations and "histories that are influenced by past and present colonialisms."³

Like all life writing, *Daughter of the East* is "informed by an 'initiative' that affects the author's entire process of composition, telling her what to write and when to edit."⁴ Through her narrative Benazir tries to construct an identity for herself and her nation while stressing the interdependence of the two. In this process she is not seen through a plain mirror. The images constructed in the process are distorted, as though refracted.

Hailing from a country steeped in illiteracy, Benazir's choice of writing in English clearly identifies the kind of audience she has in mind. She sprinkles the text with suitable comparisons and allusions for just such an audience. Her counterpart in this exercise is Kathleen Kennedy, while Samiya, Amina, and Yasmin are her own Charlie's Angels. Calling herself 'the daughter of the east', she proceeds to present before her western audience, *her* version of what the 'east' encompasses. Throughout the text she works

with binaries like modern/ traditional, liberal/ conservative and religious/fundamentalist to carve out an amicable version of true 'east' which differs from the distorted version promulgated by the few bad elements in the society.

"In the case of autobiography, how the author acts upon the narrative often overshadows how he acts in it."⁵ Benazir performs a double role as the storyteller who simultaneously participates in her own story as a protagonist. These two personas "share the same name, but not the same time and space."⁶ She is able to manipulate her own reactions, "exaggerate intentionality in treating past successes, rationalize failures, and particularly...find a unity and pattern in the disorder of past political strife."⁷ Her naive reactions to her father's questions on political issues, in spite of his careful grooming seem to serve as an example. Also, her claims about her perspicacity as regards Zia sound unconvincing as they do not fit in with the picture of innocence that she generally projects considering that the far more astute Zulfikar himself had been deceived by Zia. Her "melodramatic understanding of politics wherein Pakistan's recent history is presented as a morality play with the altruistic Zulfikar Ali Bhutto thwarted by a vile cabal of evil doers"⁸ cannot be accepted without qualms. She would like her readers to believe that her imagination was still overshadowed by the children's stories and

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Bhutto legends narrated by her father.

Her representation of Zulfikar has messianic overtones, replete with suffering and martyrdom. In her memoir, he becomes a larger than life phenomenon. True to the Muslim belief, the animals at 70 Clifton try to deflect the danger yet danger to him is so great that it kills not one, but three, of the pets. His indestructibility is highlighted as even in death "his face was the face of a pearl. He looked the way he had at sixteen."⁹ She describes the unfathomable awe and respect with which the general population of Pakistan regard him. Shahnawaz receives similar treatment by the author. His identification with the father is legitimised by Zulfikar himself when he states "Shah reminds me of myself when I was young."¹⁰ Zulfikar and Shahnawaz are the martyrs and in her autobiography, Benazir is regarded by them as a 'precious jewel' and 'closest sister.'

Her autobiography is interspersed with first person narratives of witnesses, prisoners and a wide range of PPP supporters who compliment her version of 'history.' In an effort to create a meta-narrative, the personal narrative of Benazir is transformed into the public narrative of Pakistan. "I didn't choose this life, this life chose me. Born in Pakistan, my life mirrors its turbulence, its tragedies and its triumphs"¹¹ she states. All sentiments contrary to her evaluations are regarded as 'rumours.' As a member of the ruling elite of the nation, she extols herself as the representative of the political will of the nation state.

In contrast to the west, where the demand came from within, the idea of democracy is a borrowed one for the east. Democracy was the demand not of the entire body politic but of few individuals. For the larger public only their leaders mattered. Though all participated in the struggle for independence, few actually led. Even though eastern nations adopted the paraphernalia of a democratic state, the approach of both the rulers and the subjects remained feudalistic.

Resultantly the new born nations depended on important families (with longer histories than

that of the nation) for brokering democracy. Benazir implicates this idea in her multiple references to Sindh and the Bhutto estate. The incident with the pilot at Rawalpindi airport who offers her food though putting himself in danger is a telling example- "I can still see the concern on his kind face, the tears that spilled out of his eyes. "I'm a Sindhi," he said. That was all. That was enough."¹² Feudalism here serves to fuel nationalistic sentiments. Her self-fashioning as the 'daughter' of the east becomes truly significant in this context. The naming of Bilawal, her son, further emphasizes this idea as it is replete with resonances and allusions to the history of Sindh, and to the members of its most important family. It is "a derivative of the name Bil Awal, which means "one without equal." In Sindh there is a saint by the name of Makhdoom Bilawal who fought against oppression in his time...The name also echoed my own name, which means "without comparison." So here was a name that touched the mother, the father, and the culture and history of the land" states Benazir.

The PPP is known for the family that it is associated with rather than specific political ideals. The party gains an identity through the family and the family is inextricable from the party. This is apparent when Zulfikar is imprisoned Nusrat tells him "If we leave, there will be no one to lead the party, the party you built."¹³ Benazir echoes these sentiments by adding "I could never go."¹⁴

Her closeness to her father is highlighted as she miraculously awakens at the time of his killing, feeling her father's noose around her own neck. Identification in these terms sets the stage for her own will which treats the party as a family heirloom and bequeaths it to her husband and son.

She exploits the discourse of democracy to the fullest to legitimise her leadership as the only progressive leadership for her country. Notably, it is the west that gives her the "first taste in democracy."¹⁵ The 'Larkana Bhutto' and 'Radcliffe Bhutto' distinguished by Ian Buruma¹⁶ therefore prove to be two sides of the same coin.

If it were not for her feudal background Benazir could have hardly afforded Radcliffe schooling. If she were not the daughter of a successful Larkana politician who groomed her for a career in politics and wrote letters requesting authorities at Radcliffe to encourage his daughter to study Comparative Politics, she would hardly have developed the insight and shrewdness required to survive in the political climate of Pakistan. Rafiq Zakaria in his book *The Trial of Benazir Bhutto* calls Benazir a “study in contradictions.”¹⁷ These contradictions are consciously cultivated and carefully preserved by her. She fits perfectly into the mould of a third world democratic leader as the feudal aspect is made to compliment the progressive.

“I am a woman proud of my cultural heritage.....I am the symbol of what so called 'jihadists', Taliban and al Qaeda most fear. I am a female politician leader fighting to bring modernity, communication, education, and technology to Pakistan”¹⁸ states the preface. These lines summarise the 'self' that Benazir strives to construct through this autobiography. There is a conscious effort to frame herself as a dissenting voice and to pitch her autobiography as literature of challenge.

As the heir of her father's political party, Benazir was at the mercy of alliances brokered before her time. The incompleteness of the state inherited by her is highlighted by her incapacity in getting rid of the eighth amendment or the *Hudood* ordinances.

Conflicting personal and political motives inform her dealings with the military. In her narrative, Zia is consciously and painfully separated from the army at large. However, taking over of Premiership and subsequent tussle for power dissolves this neat distinction.

Under the PPP, Pakistan may be seen as having made “transition from authoritarianism to procedural democracy, but as lacking any of the characteristics of a consolidated democracy.”¹⁹ Benazir too fails to make a strong bid for the latter. She manages only an “electocratic rule - a hybrid mix of electoral forms and authoritarianism”²⁰ in which Army exerted veto

on government in matters such as Afghanistan, defence expenditure and foreign policies.

“The intentional and, even more insidious, the unconscious element of personal interest”²¹ operates in this political memoir with regard to Benazir's relation with the West. At times she calls on the West for intervention, at other times she insists on keeping them away. The internal politics of Pakistan seem to be forever brokered by the West.

The narrative structure of life writing joins text and author by “simplifying time sequences, compressing some years and expanding others.”²² Benazir's detailed description of her time in jail is an example of the same. Omissions also figure when expedient. Nusrat's Alzheimer's is emphasised but her political differences and subsequent removal from PPP chairmanship are omitted. Murtuza's murder is also presented in equivocal terms. In this respect Benazir is no different from her adversaries who refuse to regard political opposition as legitimate.²³

Benazir highlights her gender, to pitch even higher, the image of a struggler and survivor that she wants to impart. Her preface foregrounds this as it deals with the gender specific narrative of child bearing into which her political duties keep intruding. She successfully combats with stereotypes which handicap women operating in the public sphere. At the end, she emerges as the exceptional head of government in recorded history to actually give birth while in office. She further mentions her husband's victimisation and asks “would a wife ever be imprisoned for eight years without evidence or conviction, held hostage to her husband's political career?”²⁴ Perhaps one would not consider this question to be as rhetorical as she believes after reading about her own years of exile and imprisonment on account of her father's political affiliations.

In her portrayal of her mother, sister and herself exceptionality becomes definitional. They are the 'first' Bhutto women who formulate liberal identities within the framework of 'true' Islam. While her mother is truly modernised and drives a car in the 50s, Sanam becomes the first Bhutto

woman to choose her own husband and Benazir becomes the first to give up the burqa. While she makes these claims she forgets that Begum Nusrat hardly followed the Burqa dictum and her marriage to Zulfikar was a love marriage. Her remarks about the Burqa neatly coincide with the accepted western notions regarding the garment.

Additionally, in her attempt to solidify her father's image as a modern liberated Pakistani leader, she attributes the decision of giving up the burqa to him, forgetting that Nusrat needs to seek permission from Zulfikar regarding this, as well as regarding the question of marrying within the family. This only serves to emphasise the patriarchal structure within her family. It coincides with her political discourse, which harps on democracy yet fails to translate into practice.

Though she dislikes Burqa, the sanctity the Zenana is repeatedly evoked by her as she reprimands Zia's regime and indicts his officers. Upon Zia's crackdown on the family, both her mother and father emphasise at different points in the narrative that 'especially' the boys should be safeguarded. It is a threat to their life that the father panics about where as Benazir is praised for staying on. Her gender here becomes an enabling factor. She is able to stay back in the country and garner sympathy and support of the people by virtue of being a woman. Years later Zia would confess that his worst mistake was to let Benazir live, to which a confident and composed Benazir would reply in the affirmative.

In her political discourse women's rights and family care become the crowning goals and achievements of her father's and her governments, while Zia's regime is censured for orchestrating backlash in this sector.

For her, an important marker of the 'east' palatable to the west seems to be its religiosity. She advocates that Islam is being misused by few fundamentalists to suppress the majority. However, 'true' Islam as elucidated by her is a tolerant religion. Being the daughter of the east she adheres to her religion. She is cultured but not backward, spiritual but not superstitious. She

performs her prayers and rituals in her prison cell which give her moral strength. She also helps the spirit of Ayaz Samoo by performing riots for him.

"However cunning, the memoirist is almost invariably self-betrayed into the hands of the later historian. Hence the proverb: "the book is the man."²⁵ Benazir also falls into this trap. "At times, whole newspaper columns will run blank, the journalists' method of letting the reading public know that news worthy of being printed has been removed by the censors" she observes. Though she wails about Zia's clamping down of the press, she does not mention the cartoons in the newspapers that did not miss opportunities to satirise the political games she herself was involved in.

Shahid Mehmood confesses "Bhutto provided a rich vein of drawing material for a cartoonist like myself. With such a steady stream of political incongruities she became one of the few people I could draw from memory – Gucci glasses, Hermes scarf and all....Abro's brooding illustrations for *Newsline* vividly critiqued Bhutto's government for not guaranteeing women the most basic of rights in rural Pakistan. The fact that Abro hailed from Sindh, Bhutto's provincial and constituent stronghold, emphasized the Prime Minister's unpopularity at the time."²⁶ It is precisely these political cartoons that serve to combat Benazir's refracted images by offering an alternative narrative, a different history.

Notes and References

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