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## Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Haji's The Writing on my Forehead (2009)

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### Abstract

The present study aims at the analysis of the novel *The Writing on my Forehead* (2009) by Nafisa Haji by applying Marxist-Feminist theory. It delineates the idea that women are doubly oppressed on the basis of their gender as well as on the basis of their economic status. This research also propounds that it is possible to come out or emancipate from this oppressed and suppressed plight by removing the causes of their subjugation. One of the prime causes of women's subjugation is the lack of opportunities to earn. Furthermore, they are also not allowed to own any means of production. Men in the role of husbands subjugate their wives and torture them emotionally as well as physically. They themselves indulge in extra-marital and sexual relationships but expect their wives to be faithful and loyal to them. The source text is analyzed to find out how the chosen novel conforms to Marxist-Feminist theory and it was found that oppression of women in their own families is largely the result of the patriarchal set up of the family. The result seems to conclude that along with patriarchy, economic conditions are a significant determining element in shaping the social roles of human beings particularly women. Women undergo miseries both at the hands of patriarchy and capitalism. If women are empowered economically they would get acceptance as fruitful members of society. The researcher has employed close reading technique to prove her point. The qualitative method of research has been used as this method provides every minute detail and in depth analysis of the text under consideration by applying close text reading technique. Instances from the original text i.e. *The Writing on my Forehead* are taken and analyzed qualitatively.

**Keywords:** Marxist-feminism, Engels, patriarchy, economic conditions

### Introduction

There are various powerful social hierarchies such as class systems, patriarchy, oppressing institutes. If a woman is financially stable it would ultimately lead to her emancipation from such shackles and hierarchies. In this regard the researcher intends to apply the theoretical insights of Marxist-Feminism ideologies of Haji's chosen novel.

Marxist-Feminist is an approach is an inspection of women's struggles and plights in the patriarchal set-up of capitalist society. It is an intersection of Marxism and Feminism. It is concerned with the emancipation and freedom of women. It was developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. August Bebel and Frederick Engels are given the credit for the early development of this theory. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' theory of economy determinism views economy as a controlling factor which controls all the other realities of human life such as culture, class, religion etc. Human society is divided into various groups on the basis of the possession of material goods. The class which owns the means and sources of production are called capitalists while those who constitute the working class are termed as proletariats. Capitalists do not only control the means of production but also the waged labor class. Thus the philosophy of Marxism highlights the plight of working class or proletariats. It does not only explain their underprivileged condition but also offers workable practical solutions for their emancipation and empowerment. Frederick Engels added a new dimension to Marxism by establishing Marxist-Feminism by highlighting the important notions of economic deprivation of women and patriarchy. Engels's book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is a seminal work that discusses the oppression of women. This book analyses the conditions of women both in primitive and modern societies. He also talks about the burden of unpaid domestic labor. In this research the researcher attempts to apply the theory of Marxist-Feminism as presented by Frederick Engels on Haji's interesting debut novel *The Writing on My Forehead*. The main objective of this conducted study is to see the struggle of various female characters in the face of patriarchy and capitalism so they are doubly-marginalized. Frederick Engels and his followers bring to light the issues faced by women in a capitalistic system both at their homes and workplaces. As per Marxist-Feminism economic independence is very important in the emancipation of women. The economic independence of women leads to the happiness, stability and harmony both in their domestic and social circle. Frederick Engels in his theory of Marxist-Feminist highlighted the struggle of women across the various time periods in history. As per Marxist-Feminist theorists finance plays a crucial role in the matrimonial relationship. Financially unstable women suffer greatly at the hands of patriarchy while the women who have a stable career or social position they are more valuable both in the domestic and social life. Frederick Engels' *The Origin of the Family* (1884/1972) is a fundamental text in Marxist-Feminism. It talks about the women liberation from financial deprivation. In this text Engels highlights the role which finance plays in the relationship of man and women within the domestic environment in which the man enjoys the authoritative status being the earner of livelihood and owner of the material means. Nafisa Haji is an American of Indo-Pakistani descent. She was born and raised in Los Angeles and now lives in California with her husband and son. *The Writing on My Forehead* is the first novel of the author Nafisa Haji. It was a finalist for the Northern California Independent Booksellers Association Book of the Award. San Francisco Chronicle remarks that "The Writing on My Forehead is not only a family history but also a social history with an ambitious arc. Haji deftly illustrates how the Qaders' lives intersect with defining world events. (Haji is a) talented new writer of sense and a distinct sensibility".

### **Delimitations**

This study aims to analyses the novels of Nafisa Haji, the prominent South-Asian novelist. She has written a number of novels but for the purpose of research, this investigation is delimited to only one novel *The Writing on My Forehead*.

### **Significance of the study**

This study is significant in a way that it endeavors to expose the loophole in the relationship of husband and wife where a husband always tries to gain dominance over her wife due to his

financial superiority. Here Marxist-Feminism comes to the rescue as it strives to bring a social reform in the established hierarchy of husband/wife relationship by giving fair chances to both the sexes to earn and possess means of production equally. This approach aims to create a harmonious matrimonial relationship where both members can enjoy liberty, happiness and peace of mind.

This research is also significant in understanding the dilemma of South-Asian women who suffer greatly due to patriarchy both by the family men and outside. For the liberation of women from the shackles of hierarchy economic stability and independence is required. This study also fills an important missing link in Marxist ideology that is of domestic labor of a female which is always unpaid. Marxist-Feminism considers the usual home chores as unpaid labor which is always ignored. Women shoulder up a lot of familial and household responsibilities still they do not get the due consideration and reward. Marxist ideology takes great pain in the problems faced by men at their workplaces while completely ignoring the roles and domestic duties of women. This research is significant in a way that it fills this important gap in Marxist ideology.

### **Research questions**

1. How does Haji's novel depict the condition of women in relation to the male dominated patriarchal society?
2. How do women struggle in the patriarchal set-up to get acceptance by achieving financial stability by making special emphasis on the female characters Saira and Adeeba?

### **Literature Review**

This chapter is an attempt to present a critical view of those researches which are related either to the chosen novels or are relevant to the chosen perspective and framework. A review of the gone through works are listed below:

Marxist-Feminism is one of the prominent theoretical stances of the feminist theory. Marxist theory is often criticized due to its sole focus on the labor performed outside the home in corporate sector whereas he does not talk about the domestic labour performed inside homes. The family or the domestic mode of production is based on the unpaid labour of the wife and creates antagonistic relations of production between the husband and wife. This is the basis of the patriarchal exploitation where the men are the exploiters.... The fact that the same labour when performed in the market is considered productive and has exchange value reflects the concealed value of the domestic labour. Marxists never considered domestic labour as contributing to production, as it was believed that under capitalism the family ceased to be productive. (Lokaneeta 1410)

It seems as if Marx is the representative of patriarchy as he always talks about the man's freedom from the capitalist powers. He talks about the empowerment of men by representing him in the work. Moreover, the notion of class division which he discusses in his works is also in relation to the man. He does not highlight the plight of women how they shoulder up a lot of familial responsibilities and perform unpaid domestic labour. According to many feminist Karl Marx has played a considerable role in strengthening the patriarchal system and does not talk about the empowerment of female gender. In this regard, Frederick Engels has a significant contribution in terms of creating awareness about women. He also offers strategies for their liberation. As per Engels' perspective women can attain emancipation by removing the causes of their subjugation. Prominent feminist theorists really acknowledge Frederick Engels' work regarding the sufferings of women. Female right activists take inspiration from his work and really appreciate the way he highlighted the problems of women in a patriarchal society. Engels is regarded as a pioneer of Marxist-Feminist theory that focuses on the economic problems faced by women both in the home as well as in the society. The main aim of Marxist-Feminist philosophy is to empower the women

financially so that they may uplift their status equal to that of their male counterparts “Engels was among the first to realize the importance of gender in human history” (A Pelz 123).

Frederick Engels established Marxist Feminism with the publication of *The Origin of the Family, The Private Property and The State* in 1884. He is considered to be a revolutionary thinker as he pinpointed the idea that the inferiority of women in which patriarchy believes is not a biological construct rather it is a social construct. In the primitive days among barbarian’s women used to enjoy influential position (Engels 61). Brewer in the introduction to “The Origin” describes that Engels in his core book on Marxist Feminism “set out to provide a social explanation for the emergence of women’s oppression with the development of the social institution of the patriarchal family and private property at a particular historic period” (Engels 07). Sharon Smith in her book *Women and Socialism: Essays on Women’s Liberation* highlighting this fact states: “He (Engels) developed a historical analysis which locates the source of women’s oppression. In so doing, he provided a strategy for ending that oppression. It is no exaggeration to say that Engels’ work has defined the terms of debate around the origin of women’s oppression for the last 100 years” (23). Engels has a remarkable contribution as he has given a comprehensive account of the actual source and origin of women subjugation. Moreover, he has also suggested practical solution of not only empowering the suppressed females but also give rise a unbiased social set-up in which both genders would receive a fair treatment and have equal rights. Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* provided the most comprehensive account of patriarchal history and economy and the most radical” (Millet 108). Nath (2009) carried a research titled *Identity in Diasporic Fictions: a study on Nafisa Haji’s The Writing on My Forehead*. This paper aims at giving brief description about identity crises in Asian-American diasporic fiction with special reference to Nafisa Haji’s *The Writing on My Forehead*. This article highlights the sufferings of the migrant people especially who have moved to America from Pakistan. The prime motive of this paper is to examine the identity crisis in diasporic fiction. It is „layered“ because the ambiguous identity is followed by one generation after another. The process of construction of one’s identity is not a simple process rather it takes a long way to get completed. Moreover, it is not an independent process; there are several external and outside factors that govern the process of identity construction. That is why when Saira penetrates into the superficial layers of a newly acquired culture, she realizes her „real“ identity. This ultimate realization is marked by Saira’s returns to India with her father to settle down forever

### **Research Methodology**

The researcher has employed the qualitative method of research as this method provides every minute detail and in depth analysis of the text under consideration by applying close text reading technique. Instances from the original text have been taken and analyzed qualitatively especially the utterances of the female characters. With textual analysis method the theory which the researcher has employed is Marxist-Feminism. The selected pieces of the conversation are explained and analyzed by applying Marxist-Feminist theory proposed by Frederick Engels.

### **Framework of Analysis**

Frederick Engels formulated the Marxist-Feminist theory with the publication of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State*. In this core book he laid out all the guiding principles of Marxist Feminism that consist from finding the root cause of women’s social exploitation and suggested ways to women’s emancipation as well.

## Analysis

Saira and her sister Ameena are daughters to a couple of Indo-Pakistani origin who migrated from Bombay to California. As the American-born younger daughter of strict traditional parents Saira never fits into the image of a traditional daughter. She does not comply with her cultural norms and values like her elder sister Ameena. She wants to be an independent girl and does not want to get married and settled down as per her mother's desire

"she wants me to follow a script I can't follow, Big Nanima (ibid, p.368)". Being a member of patriarchal society she is repeatedly warned not to pursue her interests rather to think in terms of getting married and have children. Her own mother, who has strongly embedded the patriarchal values in herself, does not let Saira to think in terms of her career. When Saira tells her parents that she wants to live a life according to her own terms her mother does not approve it.

Her mother Shabana says

When you forget the rules of your culture, you lose it. You forget about what is right and wrong. You forget that the reason we are here is not just to enjoy ourselves selfishly. What we do affects other people who love and care for us. It's not right to overlook other people's love and loyalty, to be selfish instead of being mindful of what you owe them. We all have duties and obligations in life. And those duties come first, before our own selfish pleasures and whims.

(Writing on my Forehead, 2009, p.34)

Shabana who resides in California along with her daughters and husband is so much concerned about her culture, values and tradition. Although she has physically moved to abroad but her inner soul is tied to the norms she herself has been brought up with. In a patriarchal society women are considered to be men's burden and responsibility that's why Shabana like all typical mothers wants her daughter to get married "I will not rest until I know you are settled. With a good husband, like Shuja" (ibid, p. 353). The institution of marriage is considered important to maintain the males supremacy. Ameena, Shabana's elder daughter gets engaged as per her parents' desire with a man of Indian origin named Shuja. Ameena is totally different from her younger sister Saira in a way that she does not resist patriarch openly. She feels contented with her mother's marriage plans for her. Saira's narrates her mother's excitement in the words "At the airport, after a quick hug, my mother began, "Your sister is engaged! To a doctor! He's an Indian boy, finishing up his residency in San Francisco." (ibid, p.254). Also Saira narrates that on disclosing the news of Ameena's wedding "Mummy was breathless from excitement" (ibid, p.255). The behavior of Shabana with Shuja and the love which she bestows on him is again something to be considered. She herself allows Shuja to have an upper hand in every decision that she makes regarding wedding. Shabana feels a lot of pleasure to feed him and presenting him a variety of dishes "you are a pleasure to feed" (ibid, p.259). Even after Saira's mother dies her aunts insist her get married out of sympathy "What about you, Saira? Are you going to be a gypsy for all of your life? Forgive me, but I have a right to ask. Your mother is dead. Your khalas are worried" (ibid, p.436).

## Women's emancipation

As per Engels the inferiority of women and superiority of men is a social construct and does not have any biological basis. As per Marxist-Feminist philosophy it is possible for women to come out from the strict control of patriarchy by getting economic independence. The most independent character of the chosen novel is that of Adeeba (Saira's Big Nanima). Even the protagonist of the novel gets her inspiration from her "I thought of Big Nanima, living alone in her little house. That's what I wanted for myself. Space. Freedom." (ibid, p.273). She gets a focus in her life due to her

Big Nanima “Big Nanima”’s story had done that for me, given me a focus for achievement that I may have lacked before” (ibid, p.281). Although there is a huge generational gap, time lapse and difference of circumstances between the both but still Adeeba fights defiantly against the odds. She prefers freedom over matrimony. For this purpose, she convinces her parents to allow her to go England to pursue higher education. Her mother being the protector of patriarchal values in the name of culture always disagrees with her wish to study she rather wants her to get married “My mother never ceased to complain, saying that I would be left unfit for marriage” (ibid, p.104). For her getting married and having children is more important than studying and to have a stable career. Saira”’s mother tells her father “what is the point of all this study?” she had asked him. „It is time for her to be married. It was time for her to be married a long time ago!” (ibid, p.106). When Adeeba asks her family to give her consent to leave for England they all got shocked and were not ready to accept this offer

But England? My father was shocked—my mother”’s silence an indication of being no less so. „Adeeba, how can we let you go so far away? Alone? It is not right, beti, it is not right that a young woman—an unmarried young woman—should be so far away from her family. (ibid, p.130)

When women are financially empowered they are given value and importance. When Adeeba gets a job as a professor at Girls College her family is not in favour of her doing job. But later when her family experiences financial challenges her job has been happily accepted. Adeeba starts giving a major portion of her salary to her father to meet the family expenses. Adeeba states about his father that initially he was not in favor of taking something from his daughters but out of need he accepted Adeeba”’s contribution “his need had outweighed his pride” (ibid, p.108). Adeeba”’s brothers were facing challenges in their business therefore

Adeeba”’s role is acknowledged by everyone during these bad days. Adeeba herself states

Our family”’s downward-spiralling fortunes were at their lowest ebb, and during these turbulent times no one dared to voice any objections to the fact that I was employed and earning. My economic contribution to the household, now, was something that everyone, and not just my father, acknowledged and appreciated. (ibid, p.133)

As per Engels when a female is economically sound she is in a better position to combat the effects of patriarchy. Her sense of awareness gets heightened. She can think of some higher things after fulfilling her financial needs. Adeeba who is a financially independent character realizes that “The success of a marriage depended no less on economics than on an intellectual understanding between its participants” (ibid, p.110). When females will be financially independent they will also be able to take right decisions regarding their marriage. Despite all the resistance which Adeeba faces she does not leave her desire to be free and independent. Finally, her mother confesses that she is unstoppable “Adeeba doesn”’t wants to be anyone”’s burden. No matter how gladly she is carried” (ibid, p.144). When Qasim leaves Zahida despite all her love and care she becomes disheartened. Patriarchal society instead of condemning Qasim for his deception rather Zahida is asked to compromise and accept his second marriage. As per Marxist-Feminist approach patriarchal man considers himself economically superior. He feels it his responsibility to support his wife financially. After his second marriage when Qasim tries to support his first wife financially she refuses to accept it. But she is made realized that it is her due right to accept financial assistance for her husband “Zahida sent the check back! I understand why she did it—pride. But there is no shame in accepting what someone owes” (ibid, p.149).

### **Polygamy vs Monogamy**

Engels says that one of the biggest flaws in men is that they practise polygamy even after marriage in which they strictly expect from their partner's complete fidelity and monogamy. Engels very clearly talks about this hypocritical behaviour on the part of males who satisfy their unquenched thirst from women other than their wedded wives. Quite contrary they expect their partners to be faithful and loyal. The novel's protagonist Saira's maternal grandfather leaves her grandmother Zahida for the sake of a British lady. Although Zahida shoulders up the familial responsibilities in the best possible way she can and also she has an exemplary beauty still she is not valued and left by her husband in disgrace. Kasim (Saira's grandfather) leaves his first wife in India and gets settled with Belle (his British wife) in abroad. Zahida is left tormented and alone. Even she leaves her home in India and moves to her elder sister in Pakistan to live with her permanently.

She was the begum sahiba of the house. Now, with no husband, she had nothing and no place (...) when he brought Belle to India a few months after he took up with her, they had no choice but to accept her. It was a humiliation for Zahida. What a fall she took. (ibid, p.77)

When Zahida gets the news of her husband's death she really takes it to her heart and could not survive after it. It clearly depicts the feminine psyche that once they are committed to someone they selflessly devote themselves for him. "A massive heart attack. Your nanima had a stroke and died one week later. Poor Zahida. As if she was still waiting for him. As if, when he died, there was nothing left to wait for" (ibid, p.83.) Saira's paternal grandfather also married thrice "Like, he had three wives. And last two were sisters" (ibid, p.211). Saira's father also remarried once her mother died. Although, his wife died due to cancer, still he does not grieve even for a short period of time "he resumed the façade of his life the very day after the funeral—going to work and coming home, watching television, and reading the paper" (ibid, p.424). It very evidently shows that women are treated as unimportant or less valuable by patriarchal men.

### **Domestic Unpaid labour**

Marxist-Feminism also highlights the problem of unpaid women's labour and never ending chains of responsibilities. Men work outside in field and have fix working hours whereas women have excessive workload. Moreover, men's work is valued and considered important whereas women who perform home chores. The reason behind this biasness is that men own private property and all means of production as the get paid for their work while women is involved in unpaid labour. Saira's grandmother Razia gets happily into a marriage relationship. She respects her parents' desire to get married. She is a beautiful lad which any man can desire for. She loves her husband that's why she started doing everything he expects of her. Razia loves her hair but her husband wants her to cut her hair as per latest trends so that she may look modern and Western. Even she is forced to wear dresses contrary to her will "he made her wear saris with sleeveless blouses (ibid, p.26)". Despite all the sacrifices which she made for the approval of her husband she fails to attain so. Her husband married a foreigner for his own happiness and even does not think about his children. if we take insights from Marxist-Feminist theory then it can be reasoned that man has this choice of remarrying because he earns therefore has an upper hand over her family "but Kasim Bhai was the head of the family. And the business" (ibid, p. 77). In a similar case Saira's paternal uncle Nadeem and his wife Nasreen gets into a marital relationship by choice. They both fell in love and get married. Although they had a love marriage still Nasreen is suppressed and is not given due respect by her husband after marriage. They have two kids Mohsin and Mehnaz who are increasingly influenced by the Western culture. Being the parents Ahmad and Nasreen are equally responsible for the brought-up of their kids but Ahmad most of the times shift the burden of

responsibility on his wife Nasreen. He talks to her in a louder tone while Nasreen's voice gets submerged in her husband's. As Saira observes "Nasreen Chachi's voice did not come up as clearly as her husband's and slipped out of hearing completely (ibid, p.190). Furthermore, the superiority of men in a patriarchal society is evident from their tone and body language "Nasreen Chachi's pleading tone and Ahmed Chacha's correspondingly angrier one" (ibid, p.190).

### **Use of women's physique for men's gratification in return for financial assistance.**

As per Marxist-Feminist approach men consider themselves to be superior because of their earning hand. They meet the expenses of their wives and in return try to control them physically by checking them from pursuing their dreams and wills.

The kind that all girls are prepared, from a young age, to have to take.

The physical journey from father's home to husband's home—the one that symbolizes the journey to becoming a woman and, most important, the transfer of power from one mehram to another. When the burden of responsibility that men bear—the mantle of protection—passes from a father to a husband. (ibid, p.137)

Patriarchal mind-set does not let women to pursue even their smallest desires and wishes. They are forced to live a compromised life. For an instance Adeeba wants to cut her hair off but she is afraid of her family. But when she gets a chance to stay away from her family she fulfills this little desire "since our days in Bombay, before Partition, I had longed to chop it off. But to finally do it. I was never very interested in such things" (ibid, p.100). Women are not independent in making the decisions of their lives rather the decisions are imposed on them by the male members of their family. Adeeba after passing through various hard stages of life comes to a realization that "when you learn that life is not only about the choices you make. That some of them will be made for you" (ibid, p.125). Adeeba always dreamt of getting higher education and never considered marriage as an option to get financial aid from someone but she is left out by her family. In her own words "I was the most educated girl in the community. And I suffered for it" (ibid, p.104).

### **Private property**

As per Marxist-Feminist theory men have gained superiority over the passage of time because he himself owns the means of production and have private property while he deprives her females from the sources of production and property. Saira has a cousin named Mehnaz. She is her paternal uncle's daughter who lives in England with her brother and parents. Her father Nadeem (Saira's uncle) always criticises the Western influence which she has embraced. Quite contrary to her outer surroundings she is not allowed to have party with her friends at night, to wear Western dresses. Even when she tries to resist her father threatens her to disown from the property "she has a boyfriend. Our father doesn't approve. They fight about it every night. He threatens to disown her" (ibid, p.205). After her father threatens her she leaves her Western boyfriend and settled with a Pakistani husband. As Mohsin (Mehnaz's brother) tells Saira "Mehnaz had married a parent-approved Pakistani a year after Aameena's wedding and had two children already" (ibid, p.331). Moreover, Saira's mother Shabana also considers her Dad culprit who made her and her mother homeless by marrying a foreigner "he threw Aamee out of her home and I lost mine, also, because of it. Pakistan was never my home. But he left me no home to visit in India (ibid, p.338)".

### **Conclusion**

It can be safely concluded from the above analysis that women are doubly oppressed on the basis of their gender as well as due to their economic position. They can emancipate from this inferior



treatment by becoming financially stable and by owing the means of production and property. The characters of Saira and Adeeba are emancipated characters who keep on combating the effects of patriarchy in their own ways by making their careers top priority. Adeeba seems to be the most independent female characters of the novel that even inspires the protagonist of the novel. She prefers higher education over marriage. At first she faces a lot of hindrance even from her immediate family. Later when she gets a job at Govt College and starts earning she starts getting acceptance. Hence the emancipation strategy which Marxist- Feminists and Haji present is that of the empowerment of women in terms of finance. By getting financial independence women can enjoy a respectable position in society as well as in their homes. They can become the valued members like their male counterparts by getting a stable career.

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