

The Perceptual Metamorphosis of Outlook through Social Encounters as Depicted in Umera Ahmad's Shehr-E-Zaat

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Abstract: This research paper aims to explicate how an individual's ideas are profoundly affected through the social encounters in one's life. These encounters can lead the way for unanticipated realizations and an out-and-out change in one's perceptions and personality. Umera Ahmad has depicted this change in her novella *Shehr-e-Zaat* (City of Self). The protagonist, Falak Sher Afghan undergoes numerous realizations. From a world of materialism and glamour, she moves to the other end of the spectrum by immersing herself in the love of God. The research paper is an attempt to answer some pertinent questions such as, what drives Falak to renounce materialistic pleasures and adopt a simple and sagacious life? What does she make of all the encounters throughout her life? Are there other characters too, who undergo major transformations? If yes, who are they? And why do they change? This paper has tried to explore these questions in depth and tried to find answers to them.

Key Words: Umera Ahmad, Shehr-e-Zaat, Falak Sher Afghan, materialism, spirituality, fiction, admiration

Umera Ahmad is one of the most widely read Urdu fiction novelists and screenplay writers of this era. She has penned more than 30 books and is best known for her novels and plays *Shehr-e-Zaat*, *Pir-e-Kamil*, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, *Alif*, *Durr-e-Shehwar*, *Daam*, *Man-o-Salwa*, *Qaid-e-Tanhai*, *Digest Writer*, *Maat*, *Kankar*, *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan*, *Doraha* and *Hum Kahan Ke Sachay Thay*. Umera's stories often revolve around man-woman relationship, societal issues and pressure. Her stories depict women at the core. Ahmad has also written novels on religion and spirituality. *Pir-e-Kamil* (2004), *Shehr-e-Zaat* (2012) and *Alif* (2019), are some of her novels that focus on spirituality.

"I come from the George Elliot school of thought, so I always have to have a didactic purpose to my stories," she said. "But with the passage of time I have also developed grey areas." - Umera Ahmad

Our focal point here is to analyse Ahmad's novella *Shehr-e-Zaat* which essentially translates into 'City of Self'.

It is a fictional story of a beautiful young woman Falak Sher Afghan. She belongs to the elite section of the society and is extremely arrogant. The story takes an amusing turn when Falak encounters a man (Salman Ansari) and falls head over heels for him. She pursues him and finally manages to grab his attention. But things go for a toss when, everyone's beloved Falak doesn't receive the kind of admiration she is looking for, from Salman. And this is when she begins to obsess about her looks, appearance and becomes overly conscious of her behaviour. Her sole aim gets focused on winning Salman's heart. She pursues him until he can no longer ignore her. From the very onset of the story, Falak makes Salman the centre of her Universe and begins to align herself with her likes and dislikes. A Beautiful smile flitted on Falak's face and in an affected and coquettish manner, she raised her right brow and said, "I know I do not need make-up, but Salman likes it. And if he likes something, how can Falak not like it? Miss Rashna Kamal! I am doing all this for one person, so that his eyes don't stray. If any face were to remain in his thoughts, it should be this face. If any being is to captivate him, it should be this being."(p.2)

For the first time in her life, she gets too emotional. She turns over a new leaf for him. The once arrogant Falak Sher Afghan is ready to accept the subordinate position at the hands of her lover, Salman Ansari. "Falak would be mesmerized by him and stare at him almost like a devotee (p. 6)"

Falak is a 21st century woman who defies the old school gender dynamic of being pursued by the man, instead she takes the reins in her hand and makes the first move. She is bold, confident, and sure of all that her heart desires. When Salman asks her out for the first time, without any hesitation she blurts out the name of the restaurant they can visit.

From then on, their dates become frequent and in due course of time, Salman proposes marriage to her. Even though Falak's father Sher Afghan doesn't approve of the match as he feels that Salman's social and economic status is not at par with theirs. Besides, Salman is ten years older to Falak. Finally, Sher Afghan gives in to his daughter's wishes and the couple gets engaged.

Falak can be labelled as the Literary New Woman here as she has a voice and a mind of her own. It was the novelist Sarah Grand who first coined the term New Woman, and she became the poster woman for the movement, although it was not until the 1980s that Grand and her work began to be studied seriously. The New Woman represented a new model of womanhood created by a group of women writers, who desired more rights and opportunities for women. However, each New Woman writer created their own version of the New Woman—each one ran the entire spectrum of feminism at the turn of the century. This holds true for Umera Ahmad as a New Woman writer too, who creates strong women protagonists in her novellas and plays. In her famous work 'Zindagi Gulzar Hai', Ahmad portrays Kashaf, the female lead as the "new traditional woman" representing a cross between the pious middle class and a Westernised liberal elite. ((**Regulating the New woman by Salman.A.Hussain**). Similarly, we witness her lead female character Imama Hashim in *Pir-e-Kamil* (The Perfect Mentor) who is on the verge of becoming a doctor but has an epiphany and renounces everything – her family, career, converts to another faith of her own free will and is prepared to suffer adversities. Ahmad's female characters are realistic, bold, rebellious, have emotional depth and go through grand transformations.

The first jolt that Falak receives from Salman is when he is ready to break off the engagement over a minor issue. However, she bows to his wishes and convinces him to take the ring back. "Love makes people helpless. I have never cared for anyone before. Now that I love this person, I know how much one has to swallow and bend over for love." (8)

During the period of her engagement, Falak tries to completely mould herself as per Salman's wishes. "...Falak changed herself according to what Salman wanted. She wouldn't dream of doing anything against his wishes. She started wearing those colours that he liked. And those that he didn't like? Well, she removed them from her life."

Life seems to be a bed of roses for Falak when she finally gets married to the man of her dreams- Salman Ansar. Falak is literally in seventh heaven for a brief period post marriage.

Despite being a Muslim, Falak is miles away from any kind of spiritual guidance or God. She takes pride in all that she has and feels that her life is complete. "Look Rashna, people pray when they have a long list of things to ask of God. Or, if they have committed sins. I don't have these issues. I don't ask God for anything, and nor do I sin. So then why should I spend hours on the janamaz (prayer mat)?" (10)

One of the prime scenes in the novella is when Salman and Falak pay visit to a spiritual place - Kamran ki Baradari by boat. As they are returning to the riverbank, Falak comes across an old man shabbily dressed and long bearded. The man who has gathered numerous stones in the hem of his shirt throws them in a puddle of muddy water. As Falak passes by, the dirty water gets splattered on her, making her enraged. Driven by fury, she admonishes the Fakir calling him blind and stupid.

He retorts by saying: "Bibi, are you frightened of dirt? Do you think this dirt will make you ugly and replace you or make you disappear from someone's eyes? Do you think that his love will end because of this dirt?" In a strange manner, he gestured towards Salman. 'Don't worry about this person. Think about God. God does not fear or get put off by dirt or mud. Whoever comes in God's sight remains there forever...

This reminds us of the verse from Ecclesiastes 3.0- "All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust." (The Holy Bible)

The social encounter with the fakir is symbolic of the first sign of spiritual guidance for Falak.

He continues to warn her by saying that all of us are beggars in the path of realising God. We think of ourselves as masters until we stumble upon obstacles. "... It is the destiny of men to be beggars. But not the Divine. The destiny of men is to beg and Divine to give. Both, you and I, Bibi, we are all beggars. If not today, then tomorrow, or some other time. Some ask of love; some ask for the world or worldly things. Those who don't ask for this, ask for the end of need and desire." (12)

A few months post marriage, Falak notices changes in Salman's behaviour. He becomes withdrawn and distant. He becomes impatient with her and criticizes her for everything. She ascribes the strange actions of Salman to some work-related problems. Listening to the advice of one of her friends, she decides to confront Salman. Finally, mustering enough courage in her heart, she asks him if he is in love with someone else. Her worst nightmares come alive when he divulges everything to her about his affair. This marks the watershed moment in Falak's life. She can feel the ground slipping beneath her feet. "She knew now for the first time how torture with lead being poured into ears feels like. She looked at him in disbelief." (18)

Standing in front of the mirror, she begins to question herself and her worth "Am I no longer beautiful? Have I become ugly? Are my eyes not able to capture hearts? Has my smile lost its ability to attract? Are my lips and my nose, just lumps of flesh?" (p. 22)

Falak begins to lose her mind at the thought of losing Salman to another woman. She ultimately decides to meet the woman in person and to burn her face with acid if she is extremely beautiful. Jealousy drives Falak insane.

But when Falak finally meets Tabinda, she is surprised to see her, and the words of the fakir keep ringing in her ears. As a consequence, Falak has a nervous breakdown and ends up in the hospital.

After coming to her maternal home, she begins to realize that religion and spirituality alone can give strength and guidance to an individual. She now realizes that Allah wouldn't have turned away had she loved Allah so deeply.

"Mummy, how I have lived a full 26 years without Allah. How did Allah tolerate me for 26 years? With my pride, my ego, my self-esteem, and my self-centeredness. How... how could Allah ignore all that? Allah tests those who he loves. For 26 years Allah has not thought of me..." (32)

Ultimately, Falak realizes that God is the Alpha and the Omega of the world.

At one instance, while coming back from the psychiatrist's office, Falak witnesses a young boy selling newspapers. She hands him a hundred rupee note without buying a newspaper and wonders at his plight. As she sees him crossing the road, she lets out a scream when she realizes that a car has hit the boy. But her mother doesn't let her get out the car, treating the accident as a mundane affair. But this social encounter leaves a lasting impression in Falak's mind. One day she resolves to find out more about the boy. When she visits the boy's jhuggi, she realizes that even the comfort station at home is bigger than the room she was standing in. The boy was one of the earners in the house and he died that day in the accident. She realizes how poverty stricken the family is. She takes out a packet and hands it over to the boy's elder sister. This incident is an eye-opener for her. She returns to her mansion with a heavy heart for the first time.

"People live with so little. And me? I feel as if the world has come to an end for anyone, it has ended for me. I live in a 6-canal house, move around in a car that costs 8 lakhs, and I surround myself with luxuries. And I fill my stomach with everything that is good in the world. With all this, what God am I looking for? Why would Allah look at me? Why would Allah look at me?"

This reminds us of a popular quote by Ibn Arabi: How can the heart travel to God when it is chained by its desires?

She realizes that she is drowning in a mire of desires and materialistic pleasures. All this makes her cry out in agony. Her mother tries to calm her down by stating that it is a fit of madness, which makes Falak even more hysterical. She cries out:

"This is not madness, Mummy! This is not madness.... These cars worth lakhs are madness...these houses worth crores are madness... This carpet is madness, by walking on which we don't feel the thorns and stones that others do... Yes, Mummy. I have gone crazy. I have gone mad. People like you and me are mad. People like us love things so much that we have made life hell for the poor who don't have what we have. All of us mad people together have done this..." (44)

When Falak's mother tries to justify the wealth as being Allah's blessing, meant to be enjoyed, Falak makes yet another strong remark: "Mummy, wealth is not a reward, it is a test." (45)

This reminds us of Kabir's Doha in hindi- '*Bada hua to kya hua, jaise ped khajur, Panthi ko Chhaya nahi, phal laage ati dur*' which translates as (It is no use being very big or rich if you cannot do any good for others. For example, Palm tree is also very tall, but it is of no use to a traveller as it provides no shade and the fruit is also at the top, so no one can eat it easily.

Falak continues to have more nervous breakdowns and is admitted to the hospital once again. She is absolutely crushed. One fine day, she decides to give away all her belongings to the poor and the needy. Upon being asked, she says: "...I want to see Mummy, how can one live without these things. Last night I read a book that those who are true to Allah can give any and everything away in the name of Allah. Give everything away and not regret it..."

As Falak moves away from materialism and into the unexplored terrains of the society, we see a sea-change in her personality and outlook. Her soul begins to get purified as she treads on the path of renunciation. The concept of renunciation has existed in most religious philosophies similar to the concept of Karma Yogi, that exists in the Bhagvad Gita. Karma Yogi is someone who neither likes nor dislikes and who is free from the pairs of opposites like happiness and sorrow, is to be understood as a constant renouncer. A person practicing Karma Yoga, who is contented by the remembrance of the Self and the Supreme Self while doing devotional service to Hari, na kângkshati - does not long for other desirable objects, like good food, etc., na dveshti - does not hate anything, whatever dry, tasteless food or rough clothes, etc., he receives as per his own luck. That satisfies him, which is sufficient for sustenance of the body.

Falak takes on the task of helping the poor and trying to solve their problems. She would pass her days in helping the needy and the rest of the time in reading the English Translation of the Holy Quran.

Towards the end of the novella, we see that Salman meets the same fate in love as Falak. The woman he marries, leaves him, taking away all his money. It is through his social encounters, that he begins to realize how much heartbreak and pain he had caused Falak. He begins to realize her importance in his life and begins to miss her. Ultimately, he tries to reconnect with Falak. But, unlike him, she is extremely kind towards him. She empathizes with his pain and listens to his tale of woe with patience. She invites him over to her home to discuss his problems. He is taken aback after seeing the transformation in her appearance and personality.

He pleads her to come back home.

She agrees to come home with him but with a disclaimer. "I'll come but I want to tell you something. The Falak that you had married 4 years ago, is dead. Today the person you want to take home with you is another person. For that Falak, you were everything. For this person, Allah is everything..."

Salman agrees to her conditions, not really absorbing the depth in her words. Falak quietly thinks to herself: "I had loved him. But now there is nothing in people that I find captivates me. He thinks that everything will be like before. How can it be after Allah has come in..."

While on her way home with Salman, Falak looks out of the window:

Separation
Helplessness
Loneliness
Tears
Longing
Desire
Unrequited love.
What is all this?
What is all this?

They are all paths of madness and unknown destinations... (56)

The change in Falak's outlook towards life brings our attention to famous lines written by Faiz Ahmad Faiz- '*Mujhse pehli si mohabbat mere Mehboob na maang... Aur bhi gham hai zamaane mei mohabbat ke siva, raahatein aur bhi hain, vasl-e-raahat ke siva*' which translates as Oh my love don't ask me for the love I once gave you... 'Not only grief of love, but the world is also full of other sorrows, heartaches, there is happiness other than the joy of union'

Conclusion: It can be observed throughout the novella, that there is a perceptual metamorphosis in the outlook of almost all the characters by the end. Falak, the female protagonist undergoes changes and transformations at every point, at first upon meeting Salman and falling in love with him, which reveals her vulnerable side of the personality for the first time. She then undergoes transformations when she encounters the fakir and contemplates his words. She does not understand the depth of his words until she is placed in a similar situation where she begs for Salman's love. Another incident that adds to her changed perspective is the meeting with Tabinda, which makes her realize that beauty is a very subjective concept. Further, the death of the boy selling the newspapers shakes Falak completely forcing her to manifest her thoughts into actions and to leave her life of comfort to serve the poor and the helpless. All the pain and the suffering, the realization of the purpose of living change Falak from a naïve young girl

into an enlightened, humble, and empathetic soul. The encounters also bring about a change in her perception of love and loving. She becomes nearer to God as she moves away from the glitz and glamour of the world. Her love for Salman also changes from madness and obsession to a balanced form of affection. At the same time, changes in Salman's personality are also worth noticing. A man who always took Falak's love for granted begins to pine for her affection after being betrayed in love by his 2nd wife, Tabinda. Falak's mother too undergoes changes after she is condemned by her own daughter for an upbringing devoid of the teachings of spirituality, modesty, kindness, love and religion. While researching this paper, we also realised that social encounters will always shape us, change us, test us, challenge us and even break us. But, it will always be upto us as to what learnings we take from them, whether we choose to become bitter or better. The circumstances will almost never be in our hands but the reaction to the outcomes will always be.

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