



A FEMINIST STUDY OF DEEBA SALIM IRFAN'S NOVEL *URMA*

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ABSTRACT

Indian writing in English has now acquired a prestigious existence especially in the field of fiction. In the contemporary scenario, many women writers have emerged in this area attempting to express the real dreams, desires, struggle and self-realization of women breaking the shackles of gender stereotyping and social inequality. Despite of dealing with an array of diverse themes and thoughts eminent writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. have been successful in proclaiming and reinforcing the sovereignty of women. This paper strives to put forward the feminist perspective of Deeba Salim Irfan's first novel *Urma*. *Urma* is a projection of an Iranian woman's pursuit of her lost life. The novel beautifully unfolds the pain, agony and aspirations of a woman amidst war and alienation. The paper also highlights the role of women's economic independence as a stepping stone leading to their moral, emotional and social freedom.

Keywords: Feminism, Iranian revolution, alienation, economic freedom.

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Urma is a projection of an Iranian woman's pursuit of her lost life. *Urma* Behdad, the main protagonist of the novel bears the pain of being uprooted from her motherland and being separated from her loved ones due to the onset of the Iranian revolution. She went on to become a successful bestselling author- who loves to live on her own terms without any compromises. But, the return of the love of her life after a twenty five year absence shook her to the core and lead her to an emotional turmoil.

Urma is written by Deeba Salim Irfan in 2012. The author, Indian by origin, is now based in UAE, has spent her childhood in Iran and has the first-hand experience of the Shah's reign and the Iranian revolution. This is what she has to say about her maiden work of fiction.

"While the backdrop of the book is Iran, it is in no way just for women of that country. I believe the book sends out a very strong message that a woman has the strength to face any hardship in life... If a woman is strong she can overcome anything in life". (Pioneer, Sunday Edition, 18th January 2015)

Reiterating the idea of women's liberation the author goes on to say

"I have also met women who are really unfortunate and totally broken, and do not have freedom of thought or expression, or are illiterate ...I have chosen to write about strong women and will continue to do so because I believe all women, no matter how oppressed, always look for inspiration." (*The National*, 28th June, 2012)

The entire novel is deeply infused with feminist overtones. This paper is an attempt to analyze the feminist perspective of the novel, especially focusing on the character of Urma – her words, thoughts and actions and her relationship with the other characters of the novel. The paper also highlights the role of women's economic independence as a stepping stone leading to their moral, emotional and social freedom.

Many feminist thinkers have given great importance to the economic independence as it acts as a potent tool for women empowerment. It wouldn't be wrong to say that economic independence supports, nurtures and reinforces emotional, moral and social freedom. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most renowned feminist of the modern times says,

"...these civic liberties remain abstract if there is no corresponding economic autonomy...It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent to close the gap separating her from the male, work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom"(The Second Sex, 739)

She calls upon women to reject the male hegemony and form their own symbolic order by "thinking, acting, working and creating, on the same basis as males;..." (The Second Sex, 771)

Shobha De has beautifully explored the realm of women's economic independence through her writing (Richa, 2013). De says,

"Everything boils down to money- that great leveler. There can be no talk of independence for women, without economic self-sufficiency." (Shooting from the Hip, 110)

The portrait of Urma is an illustration of the new-woman's self confidence in exploring her potentialities to the fullest. Urma is presented as a bestselling author living in her penthouse in Athens which she bought for herself at the age of thirty three.

...."her work was her passion; she never had time for anyone else. She could conduct research day and night for her upcoming projects and continue to write; spend time interacting with her agents,

publishers, and fans; plan her marketing campaigns ...and travel around the world for that." (Urma, p19-20)

Reflecting upon her life Urma told her friend Shereen "I have everything that I never valued and nothing that I really dreamt of" (Urma, p13). But, despite her deep sense of alienation and loneliness she did not drown herself into her tears. She looked after herself well and enjoyed the bounties of life she was blessed with.

"She carried herself well...needed little make-up though Urma would never be seen without it, ever. Her freshly trimmed and highlighted hair fell straight on her shoulders and looked fabulous, ...framing her angular face". She never forgets to apply "her favorite eye cream, followed by the best age-fighting moisturizer." (Urma, p17)

Urma had a fetish for cleanliness and precision and she wanted her employees to abide by her wishes completely.

"The glass had to be kept four inches to the left of her plate, neither six inches nor two...The candles in her living room had to be lit at sunset without fail and the fragrance in her living room always at the same level. Her cupboard had to be perfect...perfumes all in a line arranged alphabetically; all the make-up brushes were to be always clean...All linen had to change every day."(p18-19)

Urma's economic freedom coupled with her grit and determination became a part of her survival instinct which enabled her to fight and overcome the hardships of her life.

Besides its main protagonist, the novel boasts of several female characters like Aani, Maryam, Shereen, Ladan and Aanahita which are shown to be always there for Urma in her journey of life. The novel abounds in several references focusing on the special bond Urma shares with her friends Shereen, Ladan and Aanahita.

"It was as if they were one – four different souls in four different corners of the world, but with one heart." (Urma, P16)

Urma couldn't form such a close bond with any of the men in her life after being separated from Orash. Like Urma, Shereen, Ladan and Aanahita are shown as educated, independent working women striving for excellence in their respective fields. Urma loves spending time with her friends and to pamper their kids.

"Urma had always been easy with money, now even more so since she had more than enough...She loved to shop, eat and travel. And now she loved to spoil kids..." (Urma, p33)

After being reunited the women used to go on their "Girly Date" every year to a new place without their husbands, boyfriends or children. Urma used to plan and control the whole itinerary of these trips- from finding out the most luxurious hotel to booking the most comfortable flights for them. Her economic stability paved the way for such extravagant excursions. Though, for Urma their "Girly Date" was much more than that. It was a joyful and precious opportunity for her to be close to her friends and to the pleasant memories of her homeland.

"This is what Urma loved and cherished. The chatter reminded Urma of their college days when they used to behave like this all the time, full of energy. It made her feel younger, come alive again."

Their holiday was all about the freedom of their mind away from constraints and monotony of life. It can be seen as an example of how economic affluence may sometimes lead to moral and emotional contentment.

Urma was a rebel who cannot be tamed down by social restriction and tradition. She remembered how Aani used to teach her to be a good woman. Aani's words that women are created to give pleasure to men used to fill her with anger and disgust and makes her say

" I shall wait for the man who shall please me and not the man I have to please, because you know, Aani, I cannot do it. And my man is Orash." (Urma, p216)

Being aware of her inner emptiness Urma's friends keep pushing her to get married and settle down in life. Once, Urma told Shereen resolutely "I need 'my' man by my side, just 'a man' will not do!"

"So what if she was not married and didn't have children? This was her choice. How many Muslim Iranian women could make a choice like that? She didn't need to compromise and marry someone she didn't love" (Urma, p203).

Urma's concept of love was much deeper, "it's a bonding of souls, a selfless match of two hearts-where each one wants to spend time not out of concern of other but because they want to and they derive genuine pleasure out of it" (Urma, p59).

Her quest for perfection is evident in the relationships which she shared with the men in her life. She found true love in Orash very early in her life only to lose him to the hands of destiny. Urma's marriage to Mossoud, which she did only for Aani's happiness, was bitter and short-lived. They had a simple wedding as Urma didn't want to spend money on a marriage she didn't feel strongly about. She soon realized that their marriage is not going to last long.

"we don't have a life together. We're strangers under one roof...I'm suffocated ...I'm too tired of everything, of pretending that we're happy, of being a good wife to a man who can't respect me the way I want. I don't want to be a doormat for God's sake." (Urma, p159)

After finding out about Mossoud's extra-marital affair, she decided to go for a divorce. In a fit of anger she said to Mossoud,

"Loving a woman is beyond you- even if I spend my whole life teaching you, I won't be able to...I wish I had the authority to punish men like you." (Urma, p176-177)

She felt happy and relieved after her separation from Mossoud and immersed herself in her writing. Looking forward to start afresh she said,

"I don't want to waste my life for someone who can't value me, who doesn't understand me...I won't waste my life for a man who doesn't want to love me." (Urma, p178)

Again, Urma's financial stability and her immense self-belief can be seen backing her decision.

Though Urma's past made her stronger but at the same time it didn't permit her to trust any man. It made her averse to forming relationships and making commitments. On one hand, she wasn't ashamed of having a one night stand with her publisher Hossain which she found very magical and natural. On the other hand, she turned down his proposal for marriage as she can't marry someone she didn't love.

Aatish, the other man in Urma's life was few years younger than her. Urma first met Aatish when she was married to Mossoud. The two met each other many years later in Athens. Urma did care for Aatish, but on her own terms

"Aatish was different...He was happy just sharing moments with her without being over-powering and demanding. Controlling behavior was something she couldn't handle..." (Urma, p209)

"He loved her the way she was." (Urma, p22)

Their relationship grew with time but without any commitment from Urma's side

"I don't trust relationships and I just don't want to head into one!" (Urma, p207).

"My decision is firm, final, and engraved in stone." (Urma, p21)

Though Urma consider Aatish to be her savoir and her link with sanity she didn't let him direct her. When he advised her to quit smoking she said,

"What's your problem? I love it. Period." (Urma, p20)

Orash was 'the man' in Urma's life. At the age of 18, she was courageous enough to make an open declaration of love for Orash in front of Aani and moved with him to live in their shack. "He is my life, my love." (Urma, p9) Urma cherished each and every moment they spent together in Iran but she hated him for dumping her at the same time. Not a day passed when she didn't think of Orash. The invitation from her own college 'Khobgah' to be the chief guest at their annual convocation fulfilled Urma's dream of going back to Iran. She felt happy and excited to be home again after a gap of so many years. Her homecoming also leads to her reunion with Orash, the love of her life. Despite of her loneliness and constant yearning for Orash, Urma

didn't lose her composure when she met him after 25 years in Iran. Orash's comeback opened the floodgates of innumerable multitude of bittersweet memories buried in Urma's heart.

"She had not loved anyone else in her live as much as she had loved him, nor she hated anyone as much as she had hated him." (Urma, p99)

Urma was overjoyed to see him back and love to relive their moments of togetherness but she was still not prepared to accept Orash's proposal for marriage.

"This moment was important to her – she was dying, little by little from within. She needed him to answer some questions, which he had so far not done." (Urma, p112)

Eventually, Orash was able to clear all her doubts and apprehensions. He told Urma how he got engulfed in the flames of Iranian revolution and how he lost his parents to that. After being settled in the US he kept visiting Iran every year hoping for a miracle to see Urma some day at their shack.

"...it was fate, not me? We were destined to be apart, Urma. And we were destined to meet again..." (Urma, p226)

The lovers got reunited finally during the Iranian festival of 'Nourooz' which signifies love, rebirth and happiness. The purity of Orash's love for Urma purges her from the pain and bitterness of her past and leads her towards eternal bliss and permanence she has always dreamt of.

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