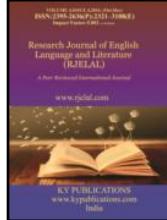


RESEARCH ARTICLE**BOYS WILL BE BOYS: A MOVING TALE OF A FAMILY AND A NATION****Dr. JHARNA MALAVIYA**

Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Allahabad

Email: jharnamalaviya@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Sara Suleri's memoir, Boys will be Boys, is a classic of postcolonial literature; a book, vital for understanding the postcolonial world of India and Pakistan and their complex shared past. Suleri brings to life the lost world of Pakistan and examines the complex network of power and cultural discourses that has shaped the present. In the memoir, Suleri's family becomes a microcosm of the nation and her love-hate relationship with her father, the love-hate relationship with Pakistan. Boys will be Boys is a touching saga of the death of an era, a family, and a nation, and the birth of a new world ruled by fundamentalist forces. Suleri does not accept historical narratives at face value. She doubts history and Boys Will be Boys is an attempt to revisit and rewrite history, to narrate untold or silenced stories of the past, and to understand how feudal cultural hangovers, half-baked democratic bourgeois values, and the discourses of cultural imperialism shape the society. A professor at Yale University today, Sara Suleri was born and brought up in Pakistan. Her mother was a Welsh journalist and father a renowned journalist who migrated from India to Lahore after the partition of India. Her tales are full of nostalgia, a deep sense of loss, and an open dislike for grand narratives that have always cheated people. Boys will be Boys is a must-read.

Keywords: Sara Suleri Goodyear, Boys will be Boys, Postcolonialism, Pakistan, memoir, cross-cultural dialogue,

Introduction

Many writers have tried to study the postcolonial world, but much remains to be said and documented. It is necessary to study how cultural discourses function in a society and how they alter and redefine the vital concepts of nation, state, patriotism and family. A threadbare study of everyday life is needed to shed light on the hidden network of power and cultural discourses. As a postcolonial writer, Sara Suleri takes up the challenge and weaves a moving tale of a family and a nation. It is necessary to define her achievements and her contribution to the postcolonial theory and fiction.

A Comic Elegy

Unlike Meatless Days (Suleri's first memoir that she had dedicated to her mother), Boys will be Boys is in a lighter vein. Its author said in an interview, "I was much younger when I wrote Meatless Days and I think my language was more lubricated than it is now. Boys will be Boys was far more difficult to write because it is an elegy; I wanted it to be a comic elegy, if that is possible, and to intimate that I loved my father." (Shamsie)

Boys will be Boys is a daughter's nostalgic tribute to her father, who died before he could begin his dream project – his autobiography. He

often joked that he would name it "Boys will be Boys". She explains, ". . . he would frequently announce that he was going to write his autobiography and call it Boys Will be Boys, and then would burst into a roar of laughter . . . at some crucial Muslim League conference in Delhi, Jinnah got up and announced, 'All right, boys. And now get to work for Pakistan!' I was touched by that tale: how appropriate it felt, for whose boy were you, Pip, other than that of the man you would call – time after repeated time – 'my leader!'" (*Boys will be Boys* 18)

The delightful book traces Suleri's childhood in Pakistan. *Boys will be Boys* brings to life her childhood memories, half-forgotten stories of her family, and the historical and political events of Pakistan. The result is an astonishing melange of history-writing and household chitchat. *Boys will be Boys* does what historical records and documents cannot – it captures very vividly the mood of a tumultuous era. The book offers a rare picture of the kaleidoscope of Pakistan – we come across the famous Urdu poet, Iqbal and listen to the speeches of generals and rulers of Pakistan, we celebrate Eid and Muharram with Suleri, and visit universities and colleges, we walk on the beautiful roads of Lahore and stroll on the narrow streets as we taste the spicy street food. Suleri admires Urdu – a language she has left far behind. This deep fascination with Urdu finds expression in the form of beautiful Urdu poems, couplets and lines, picked up from poets like Ghalib, Faiz, Akbar Allahabadi, Momin, Mir, and Hali, which embellish each chapter with their refined elegance. Suleri's Pakistan emerges swathed in the fragrance of captivating Urdu ghazals. In an interview Suleri had said, "In *Boys will be Boys*, I attempted to honour my love for Urdu in the chapter headings" (Shamsie).

A "hodgepodge" picture of Pakistan

The book begins with a "hodgepodge" (*Boys will be Boys* 6) picture of Pakistan – Sara Suleri introduces her father as a man who was "always exuberant" (13) about his editorials and his articles, even when he did them every day. The book is addressed to Sara's father who was

always upright in politics, "but not quite so upright with his children" (17); he used to read secretly his daughters' personal letters and diaries. This man of many contradictions, whose patriotic sentiments for Pakistan were the pivot of his life, had started a new married life in Pakistan with a Welsh woman who was ironically, "an ethnic reminder . . . of a race that should have been gone" (12)!

Boys will be Boys takes us through the vast tracts of Suleri's life in Pakistan – she recalls the old city of Lahore and the beautiful river Ravi, she talks about India-Pakistan war, the bazaars of Pakistan and their "unique talent for plagiarism" (13). She revisits the "Lahrance Gardeen" (the name given to the beautiful Lawrence Garden by illiterate people) of taxi drivers and rickshaw pullers, and the elegant constructions of the colonial days. She fondly remembers the broad roads lined with stately trees and public gardens, the larger-than-life statue of Queen Victoria (which later disappeared), and the beautiful mahogany piano at her home (that belonged to her great grandfather). She recalls the typical Lahore mornings and twilights fragrant with Motia and Rath ki Rani and the lawn of their house where "Pip", her father, used to sit on his wicker chair in the evening. Suleri, it seems, has forgotten nothing.

The book gives us an intimate account of the socio-cultural fabric of the postcolonial world of Pakistan – its Gulbarg market flooding with salwar kameez (the dress worn by women in Pakistan), Rahat Bakery, and the culinary changes made by the English rulers in the subcontinent. She takes us to the open-air theatres of Lahore and the popular music and quawwali festivals that were unthinkable without the melodious voices of Begam Akhtar and "Malika-e-Tarannum" Nur Jehan. An ancient pre-colonial world and a modern "westernised" post-colonial world – both share the same room in south Asian countries like Pakistan. The strange interbreeding of these mutually antagonistic worlds has given birth to a new cultural world, that wants to hold on to its past on the one hand as an assurance of its

distinct national identity and on the other hand to adopt and accept western lifestyle and mindset. Yearning for a last word with her departed father, Suleri finds memoir writing a relieving experience. The memoir becomes a means of communicating with him – she talks to him freely, argues with him, questions him, and confesses many secrets too in this moving elegy. She recalls forgotten family codes, jokes, anecdotes, and incidents, she expresses her long-standing grievances, and she raises objections to things that she had found preposterous in the past. All this is addressed to a father who, “toward his children . . . maintained a more ambivalent rigidity” (61).

Suleri allows her thoughts and emotions the freedom to follow their own course. As a result, the events narrated in the book are in no chronological order. Suleri apologises, very humbly, for the lack of coherence in her “unchronological” narration. Suleri says that Boys will be Boys is a “hodgepodge” biography of a systematic father. She writes to her father: “Listen, Pip. This is not a complaint, it is a history, you were so hither and thither, so much back and forth, that it is hard for me to be chronological, in any case, my instincts have never led me to chronology (39). Sara Suleri often takes long strides over the measureless expanse of the past; at times she moves abruptly backward and forward too. She cuddles her cherished childhood memories closer and holding them tenderly in her arms, she caresses them fondly. She tells the readers, “He was a most affectionate man, quick both to love and admire, yet I do not recall a single of his friendships that was not somehow trammelled by history.” (60)

Suleri’s engagement with postcolonial cultures and cross-cultural interaction is understandable. In the highly acclaimed book, *The Rhetoric of English India*, she explores the theoretical aspects of the postcolonial experiences of colonial India. Thus, beginning with Edmund Burke and Warren Hastings and the 19th-century women diarists like Fanny Parks and Harriet Tytler, Suleri moves on to study Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster and finally V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie to examine the textual strategies by which these

writers have dealt with the colonialism. The book is valuable for its penetrating analysis of the intermingling of diverse cultures in modern India. Suleri shows great and abiding interest in studying the stories of the colonisation of India. Boys will be Boys does exactly what *The Rhetoric of English India* does at theoretical level – both challenge the standard chronology of imperial history.

Suleri pushes hard her imagination to conceptualise her father for some time “as a friend instead of as a father” (Boys will be Boys 61) to understand the life of this complicated man. But these efforts are doomed to fail. Thus, she revisits his past, his obscure childhood, she collects jumbled pieces of his past life, and by putting them together, she tries to reconstruct his life. She recalls that he was a typical father who would never hesitate in thrusting his wishes assertively upon his family, without any moral qualms. Suleri recalls humorously how her father had fixed her marriage with the son of an old friend, without bothering to inform her. He wanted to consolidate seventy years of their friendship. Suleri remembers sourly that he had given him his word too, because he found it absolutely unnecessary to ask his own daughter, who had remained “blissfully unaware of this proposition”, her wishes and choice (65). She chuckles at the apparent innocence of the whole contract, “‘On my part, brother, you can have her. But now you must ask the girl.’ You see, Pip was a politician, for his statement did not seem to infringe upon the rights at all, except that by Paki standards of interpretation it would register as a resounding consent, with the formality of asking the little girl herself a frivolous ritual of finality.” (65)

Sara Suleri sees a striking similarity between the patriarchal discourses and state discourses. She mocks self-assumed prerogatives of the male and the authoritative male psychology. She says, “The law of nature in Pakistan cried out that the bond between the two men should, most happily, be cemented in the wedlock of their offspring. It was not the brick and mortar that I desired as my fate, so I had to

work hard to break out the edifice they were constructing for me." (64)

Boys will be Boys is a memento of Suleri's love for a father, whose children had to adopt a manner that combined "amusement with admiration" (71) and whose absence made the family go on a carnival. Suleri says, "three weeks without Pip's strict disciplinary habits constituted for us a glorious holiday" (66). On his return, the doors of the Gulmarg 5 (their house) "closed and locked again" (65).

A life Lived in Translation

The memories of Suleri's mother emerge slowly from the dimly lit storehouse of faded remembrances that flit through the daughter's mind in a mad jumble. Wiping the dust of time from these palely luminous jewels, she observes, "In a way, my mother lived most of her life in translation" (69). Checking the mighty rush of memories for a little time, the author pauses to explain the difficult situation of women who live their lives in cross-cultural translation. "Cultures are certainly translated things: moving from one to another requires a discursive equilibrium hard to acquire, hard to retain" (69), observes Suleri. Her analysis is thought provoking indeed: "She (Sara's mother) never spoke Welsh, which her parents did; her French was merely academic; Urdu was one of those illusions that cast its shadow over her, but never long enough for her to possess it. As for Punjabi, it always struck us as a singularly male language: we even cringed slightly when Ifat taught herself to speak that red-blooded tongue with such gusto. The rest of us women remained monogamous, linguistically speaking, since monogamy is our wont in other matters too. It makes a simplicity out of an existence already too prone to lascivious activities with complexity. And one of those complexities is surely the act of translation, which slips in and out of the most seemingly simple sentences, seizing them into new postures of articulation." (69)

A whole chapter in Boys will be Boys is devoted to the dilemma of living in two different languages. She recalls the lines of Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream, "Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated" (73) and discloses

her own bittersweet experiences of the English-speaking world where she is, to her own embarrassment, often complimented for looking so "exotic". She observes, "The phrase does not register as the compliment it is intended to be, because it seems to place my personage outside the ambit of a world for which I have increasing affection." (Boys will be Boys 70)

Soul refreshing monsoon rains, winters with deep blue skies, languorous afternoon hours spent cracking peanuts, cashews and pistachios in the sunlight garden, and summers with treats of "lassi" (57) and desi mangoes – Suleri leaves out nothing that has played even a trivial part in her development. She describes the "dug-duggi man" (78) who used to come with trained monkeys that would comically mimic "laat sahib", the British ruling class and she devotes many pages to her favourite season, the season of spring, which used to be the ideal time for enjoying "falsas", "jamans" (99) and berries. She fondly remembers her father with his "fits of patriotism" (120), his passion for "chiselling" (82) his sentences with his Parker and Mont-Blanc pens (classic mementos of colonial era), and his love of cigars. She remembers, "In my mind's cataracted eye I can still see the blur of him writing, sitting in his old armchair, pen in hand, gatha on knee, amidst a bevy of brightly coloured telephones." (77)

However, Suleri is never carried away by emotions when it comes to serious analysis. She does not hesitate to break down the entire emotional halo, which is deliberately built around the concept of motherland. She makes a candid remark: "Pakistan: that is land of the pure, or the pure land itself; taken from either perspective is a great misnomer" (102). She does not forget to add that Pakistan has virtually become a land of kidnappers in the last ten years. It has lost its clear blue winter sky in "the traffic, the sewers, the pollution" (103). Her contempt for the way things are going becomes unmistakable when she declares that she does not wish to linger too long on "the governments or the constitutions that unfurl periodically as though they were annual plants" (103). She cannot forget for a single second or cover under beautiful descriptions, "the

blood upon which the nation was inexorably built" (105). The famous poet, Faiz, echoes in her ears reminding her of, "those who were killed in the darkened streets" (107). These sad tales are emotionally exhausting and very painful, she admits, "I am too tired to construct a proper chronology of what constitutes the history of Pakistan" (106). She cannot forget the ruthless war of 1971 and "its colossal failures, its unutterable consumption of lives" (108), and the "unrecountable slaughter that accompanied the partition of India" (106). Suleri's heart seems full of deep agony and pain.

Memories of her elder sister, Ifat, the embodiment of beauty and innocence, and ironically the most "Pakistani" of all her brothers and sisters, make Sara sad and bitter. She was murdered in broad daylight on a street in Lahore. Ifat's murder made Suleri realise how cheap life had become in Pakistan. The grief-stricken sister remembers how Ifat used to sing the national anthem in erect attention, "long live, you purest land!" The sarcasm in Sara Suleri's tone is biting, "Of course it would live on without her; Pakistan can do without any number of us, pure or impure" (111). Pakistan is no place for innocence and beauty; the politics of hatred and heinous crimes tramples them everyday under foot.

A Story of Dust to Dust

Suleri's tale is a continuation of the tragic tale of the postcolonial India, a tale that has repeated itself in diverse forms and in diverse locations. Suleri's Lahore has been a victim of almost the same cultural discourses as the postcolonial India.

She adds, "... nothing in the city lives up to the promise of such a welcome, so that somehow one is always expecting to find Lahore without quite locating it. I used to find it perverse myself, that aura of anticipation, until it occurred to me that the town has built itself upon the structural disappointment at the heart of pomp and circumstances and since then I have loved to be disappointed by its streets. They wind absentmindedly between centuries, slapping an edifice of crude modernity against a medieval

gate, forgetting and remembering beauty, in pockets of merciful respite. (54)

These lines remind the reader of another saga of our postcolonial world; this saga has been narrated by A. K. Mehrotra in the introduction to *The Last Bungalow*. *The Last Bungalow* is a book that studies the tremendous impact of British colonisation on the socio-cultural fabric of India. The book moves from the colonial era and its peculiar psyche to the postcolonial era and traces the emergence of a "hybrid" culture. *The Last Bungalow* is the story of a magnificently planned city of spacious bungalows and wide, peaceful roads bordered by stately trees. Like Boys will be Boys, *The Last Bungalow* examines the birth of a modern "hybrid" generation and studies the protracted tussle of these different worlds. *The Last Bungalow*, like Boys will be Boys tells "a terrible human story" of a city that had once been a citadel of knowledge, education, and socio-cultural movements in the northern provinces of colonial India. "It is a story of dust to dust . . ." (*The Last Bungalow* 31) Mehrotra concludes.

In the fading light, with not a breath among the leaves, Suleri concludes Boys will be Boys. She sounds calm and humble in the moistness of loss and pain. She says, "I do not mean to be critical of Pip, after all, I was never born a colonised person and do not know the elation that he felt when he hoisted up the Pakistani flag in London." (*Boys Will be Boys* 120)

Fiction and theory come together in Sara Suleri's world. Suleri has beautifully painted an era and its sad demise. To conclude, Boys will be Boys will always be remembered as a touching and unforgettable elegy for a father and a nation. The memoir tries to bring to light the hidden patriarchal discourses that govern the postcolonial world. It tries to shed light on the position of women in Pakistan. Boys will be Boys entreats readers to participate in the story that tries to unravel grand narratives and to turn all sacrosanct customs, beliefs, values, ideas and ideals inside out. Boys will be Boys is a beautiful and commendable attempt to understand how cultural discourses operate in our postcolonial world today.

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