



MEHER PESTONJI'S *PERVEZ*- A NOVEL: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Feminism is an assortment of movement and ideologies aimed at establishing and defending equal rights of women. A feminist advocates and endeavors for the uplift of women's socio-political, economic and legal rights and upholds equality of women in society. According to Deborah Madsen, "Feminism deals with women about oppression, consciousness and gender" (200). Feminism, from literary point of view has raised voice against the patriarchal oppression and addressed the issues closely related and relevant to the women's rights – the rights that are partially restricted by masculine domination. The word 'Patriarchy' means the rule of the father or chief over the family. Patriarchy is "a social system in which males have complete power in the economic, social and political arena, and has designated gender roles which are appropriate to these arrangements" (Bhasin 3). The women writers boldly lend voice to the issues of women. They bring into focus the violence, degradation and oppression faced by women in a male dominated society and how they fight against such oppression. This paper is an attempt to explore Meher Pestonji's work *Pervez- A Novel* from feminist perspective.

KEYWORDS:

FEMINISM, PATRIARCHY, VIOLENCE, MEHER PESTONJI, *PERVEZ* – A NOVEL.

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'Feminism' was first used by French dramatist, Alexander Dumas in nineteenth century. Feminism is a social, economic, political movement for the emancipation and liberation of women from discrimination and oppression of the society. Kamala Bhasin in *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia* states "Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation, and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in the society in general and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation" (3). Initially the term 'Feminism' was limited to the political movement but later it spread all over world, securing social, political, economic and educational rights for women. "Feminism deals with women and their status in society and asks questions about oppression, consciousness and gender" (Madsen 200). Feminist literary theory which emerged from the feminist movement evolved according to the need and demands of the movement. Earlier the concern was limited to the equal rights but later feminist began to realize that equal rights alone cannot free women from the sexual and social subordination. Hence, feminist writers re-analyze and re-access the socio-cultural set up to explain the mechanism of patriarchy that were constructed to keep the women eternally subjugated. The women writers boldly depicted the issues of women in their writings. One

such women writer is Meher Pestonji.

ANALYSIS:

Meher Pestonji was born on September 19, 1946 into a Parsi family. After completing her schooling, she did her graduation in psychology. Currently she is living in Mumbai. She has wide spectrum of interests. She has been a writer, a theatre critic, book review columnist, social worker and a freelance journalist. She fought for slum dwellers' housing rights, children's rights and anti-communalism campaigns. She participated in the campaign to change rape law in the 1970s. She took part as an activist to restore the peace after the Mumbai riots in 1992-93. During the riots, she worked with zeal and zest in collaboration with the Mohalla Committees in various riot affected parts of the city of Bombay. She puts forward her analysis on SriKrishna Commission report on Bombay Riots in 1992-93. She has credit of writing two novels, a short story and two plays. Her works are based on both the Indian and Parsi point of view. Her fictional works reflect her respect and understanding for other communities as well. She speaks both for the Indians and the marginalized Parsi community. It is her love for humanity which makes her to cross boundaries and express her feelings for right to life.

Published in 2003, *Pervez – A Novel* was the first novel by Meher Pestonji. The plot of the story is based on the life of

young Parsi girl, Pervez, her broken marriage and ultimately turning into a social activist. The novel is set against the backdrop of communal riots during the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1993. The novel opens with the protagonist, Pervez who is about to return to her native place, Bombay breaking her marriage with Fred. It was her friend, Anjali's birthday party where she met Fred. During party Pervez "could not take her eyes off Fred" (*Pervez – A Novel* 29). It was love at first sight for Pervez. Her parents were happy expecting that Pervez is roaming each night with Farhad, a Parsi boy. But all their dream got shattered when they discovered that the boy with whom Pervez was roaming was not Farhad. When she reveals her relation with Fredrick Mendonca, a Christian boy. "Her parents froze into statues incapable of sound or movement" (33) with the news. Their reaction was tangible as according to the Parsi tradition, marriage outside the community is strictly banned in order to safeguard the racial purity of the Parsi community. Her parents does not like Fred's profession and his native place as mentioned in the novel, " "Bandwala!" Her father dropped the cup he was holding" ... "Only cooks and ayahs come from Goa" (34). The reactions and actions reflect his patriarchal nature. The literal meaning of the term 'Patriarchy' is the rule of the father or chief not only over the women but also over the younger and subordinate male of the family. Sylvia Walby, a sociologist in her work *Theorizing Patriarchy* defines patriarchy. She penned that it is a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Kamal Bhasin in her work *What is Patriarchy?* defines Patriarchy "as a social system in which males have complete power in the economic, social and political arena, and has designated gender roles which are appropriate to these arrangements" (3). In patriarchal system, men have an advantageous place in the society which give them power to exercise control over women and suppress them in various ways such as physically, sexually, and psychologically. Pervez's father like a true patriarch pressurized his daughter and ordered Pervez, " "I forbid you to mention his name in my house! Put an end to this stupidity here and now!" ... "No 'if's' and 'buts'. My word is final. From now you have to tell your mother who you go out with, where you'll be, what time you'll return" (*Pervez – A Novel* 34). Pervez's parents tried hard to keep her away from Fred but Pervez found her way to meet Fred and soon elopes with him to Goa. But her life after marriage become more challenging. From the day one Fred started dominating Pervez by taking decision on her behalf and restricting her freedom to choose. Pervez was baptized without her consent by Fred. Fred also did not allow Pervez to attend her parents funeral rites. Further, the act of violence against women is perceived as an essential for maintaining the authority and superiority of men within the family. In words of Robert Paul Wolf, "Violence is the illegitimate or unauthorized use of force to effect the decisions against the will or desires of others" (606). By force of violence, women are deprived and discriminated at the hand patriarchy and matrimony. Man

has achieved the authority of dominance and power over woman through the historical privileges and woman has the compulsion to adopt the male-constructed power control system. R.J. Kalpana in her article entitled "Phallic Reflections" asserts, "In most simplified form, violence is defined as abuse and it takes on many guises, from physical assault to psychological domination to social subjection to cultural oppression" (68). In the beginning Pervez feels at the top of the world with her love of life, Fred but soon after few years of marriage, she realized that she had taken erroneous decision in choosing Fred as her life partner. Pervez's "slow slide of sloth" (*Pervez – A Novel* 46) began after the two years of marriage. She left her parents prosperous life and adapted to the new different world but Fred never gave value to her. He became violent towards Pervez with a course of time. She remembered his first fling when Fred returned to Goa with his band. In words of Pervez, "she would never forget the sting of that slap. Humiliation more intense than pain" (190). Such scenes of violence repeated after every few months and the "[s]cars of each episode drew a wall between them" (48). In Indian society, woman is considered to live with the support of male desires only. This can be seen in the novel as well where Pervez easily forgive Fred for his boorishness of previous night. He promises her that he will not stray away but Pervez finds out that it is "[a] common promise, made only to be broken" (48). Pervez realized that it is onerous "to stay connected" (38) with Fred, a womanizer man. Ultimately, she parts away with Fred and returned to her native place Bombay to start a fresh in her own city. Though it was not easy for her to adjust to the changed city but she accepts all the challenges coming her way and ultimately wins over her personal pain and agony, living an independent life in her own flat in Kalinga away from her past elite life, her bother and Fred.

CONCLUSION:

Meher Pestonji's work *Pervez – A Novel* contains the feature of feminism. The work has depicted patriarchal practices by society to subjugate the women but has also portrayed the image of strong, powerful and self-reliant woman who was initially bound in the shackles of societal norms, values, customs and manners but at the end she emerges successfully asserting her self-identity.

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