

Structuring the Voices of Activism in Farzana Doctor's *Seven*: The Dialectics of Damage and Disclosure

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Abstract

Recent interventionist actions around the world have dented the essentialist construct of 'the nation' with its rigid emphasis on the rhetoric of 'domestic affairs'. Be it Greta Thunberg's sustained protest about climate change or Robert Malley's warning about global peace and security, overt and covert global activism has opposed the abiding formulation of the nation and its functioning like never before. Speaking up, sharing resources, utilizing networks, showing support, and so on have inspired citizens to show solidarity for the 'marginalized other' in oppressive systems, cutting across their power and privilege. The role of literature has become more potent, as compelling, cogent fictions have allowed greater room for bargaining, wielding power, and welding resistances against systems of tyranny. This article proposes to understand the shifts in diasporic practices of Indo-Canadian writers by focusing on Farzana Doctor's recent novel *Seven* (2020) as an aesthetic-cum-resistant enterprise. Taking biographical experiences and exposure as a social worker, Farzana Doctor teases out the complexities of the community practice of *Khatna* or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), by dialectically balancing the feminist uproar on female circumcision and the oppressive control exercised by the community.

Keywords: Gender Violence, Literary Activism, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Third World Feminism, Sexual Trauma, *Bildungsroman*

Introduction

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, Farzana Doctor's *Seven* stormed into Canadian and world literature by initiating a dialectic of disclosure and damage by revealing an insidious ritual, clandestinely practiced in Dawoodi Bohra communities around the world. Employing a feminist lens, Doctor details an inter-generational family tree, which demystifies a number of patriarchal taboos around sexuality, structured systematically in religious codes, while exposing the damage done in the name of religion and community.¹ The protagonist of the novel, Sharifa, and her self-motivated desire to research her community patriarch Abdoodally and his genealogy reveals some of the shocking truths of her own life and sexuality, as the past unfolds like a jigsaw puzzle of hidden truths, with interlocking memories from various characters as pieces. The novel employs

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¹ Kiran Bhat, 'Growing Curious: A Review of Farzana Doctor's *Seven*', *Prism International: Contemporary Writing from Canada and the World*, 18 February (2021). At: <https://prismmagazine.ca/2021/02/18/growing-curious-a-review-of-farzana-doctors-seven/>.

the *Bildungsroman* and *Erziehungsroman* tropes about *Khatna*. The narrative is not linear; it oscillates between Sharifa's life in New York to Abdooally's life in India. Doctor's thematics have not yet been analysed within the paradigms of nation and multi-ethnic and diasporic identity ambivalence; work awaits which could discover potentially heterogeneous epistemologies due to her location and position as a lesbian Muslim writer. Doctor's other novels, also, equally resist the systematic oppression of women, by way of challenging, questioning, and rupturing the heteronormative notions of sexuality. It was the appeal of building a layered resistance against the hegemonic patriarchalism, the story, that made *Seven* an act of disruption and refusal to negotiate across gendered and religious practices. The amoeba-like identities of characters are constantly reshaped, hammered within a unique trans-cultural lens on the diasporic immigrant experience.

In the novel, the issue of FGM is fictionalized not as a gross, knee-jerk reaction, but rather as a ratiocinated, discursive deconstruction of the practice through breaking the silence around it; challenging the very social norms that made the practice mandatory while acknowledging that deviations from or rejection of the practice results in social ostracism.² The religious power of Islam and of countless communities globally who religiously follow the practice through different generations have met with contempt, resistance, and opposition with legal mediation and arbitration; but have not been able to completely curb or uproot the practice in all respects, as the age-old ritual remains deeply rooted in cultural legacies, systematic and methodical conventions, rites and sometimes also celebration ceremonies. Doctor's narration challenges it from its origination to its structural materialization as a practice, in order to shed light on violent and oppressive gendered practices in religion, without the intent of attacking the community, as often is seen with anti-traditionalists or non-conformists opposing the supporters or upholders of the practice. From the stages of assimilation to reinventing self-image and identity, embracing cosmopolitanism and multi-locationality; to the discursive art of speaking up, Farzana Doctor's *Seven* engages with the past and Sharifa's great-great-grandfather's legacy, by using the narrative apparatus of Sharifa's travel to India and the psychological and physiological displacement of other women in her Dawoodi-Bohra community. Here I engage a close textual reading with socio-cultural contextualization of the diasporic as well as a feminist gaze; I analyse *Seven* using the lenses of diaspora, sexuality, and feminism to reveal oppressive practices in communities.³

Doctor creates an interventionist activism with her fiction, giving agency and legitimacy to the calls for urgent undertaking and collective awareness onto the issue of *Khatna* through the literary medium in both diasporic and global spaces. Doctor's oeuvre encompasses issues of sexuality and the lack of any/some agency, with the author's own lesbianism as a motivation. The diasporic consciousness further problematizes the fictional account of Sharifa's exploration of her line of descent, particularly focused on one of the grand patriarchs, rather than simplistically narrativizing her own journey as an immigrant, a survivor of *Khatna*, or even through the fictional

² Yasmin Bootwala, 'A Review of Female Genital Cutting in the Dawoodi Bohra Community: Part 3—the Historical, Anthropological and Religious Underpinnings of FGC in the Dawoodi Bohras', *Current Sexual Health Reports*, vol. 11 (2019), pp. 228–235.

³ Reetika Revathy Subramanian, 'We are not like them': Reinventing modernity within tradition in the debates on female *khatna* / female genital cutting in India', *Feminist Review*, vol. 135 (2023), pp. 3–24.

Sharifa's design. The legal, political, and social discourse around female genital mutilation is effectively built and bridged in *Seven* with a contrapuntal fictitious historical activism co-existing alongside. The title is conveyed as such to signify the pre-puberty age of Bohra community girls, who are taken at this naive, unsuspecting age of "seven" to undergo the ritual, without emotional, physiological or psycho-somatic/ cognitive awareness of the consequences of the act.

Diasporic Identity: A Constant Quest for 'Home'

The novel begins with Sharifa's existential position as an immigrant; a position constantly negotiated within liminal space, the interstitial zone of fading Muslim identity, yet foregrounded on a desire to be a part of the Dawoodi Bohra community. In the text, Sharifa states that "When we migrated, we had to assimilate but just the right amount - my parents didn't want me to become too Western. I wasn't even sure where the balance point was on that see-saw, but I followed their lead the best I could."⁴ Homi Bhabha calls this 'in-between' space, "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national and anti-nationalist histories of the people and by exploring this third space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves."⁵ Be it Sharifa's vacillations between Eastern and the Western values over "Snucking smokes and beers with friends and wearing Shalvaar Kameez to social functions,"⁶ the undercurrents of these characters' actions capture the inherent predicaments, their anxieties, contradictions, and consciousness of duality. This diasporic identity is always in motion⁷ and continues to pose an enigma, "as travelling to the homeland has always been ... complicated."⁸ Yasmeen Hussain comments on interstitial existence and argues:

the third space is an open, expansive space encouraging the assimilation of contrary signs and meta-narratives which obviously remain a necessary precondition for the articulation of cultural difference and the inscription of cultural hybridity.⁹

It is here that the third space becomes a space of enunciation, self-discovery, soul-searching self-examination, by fashioning and attaching itself to some while rejecting other aspects of identity.

For Sharifa, this self-fashioning is also determined and decided by her moment of truth of *Khatna*, which explains her devitalized and deformed sexual expression; her experience of cutting brings her to the verge of dissociation and outright rejection of the same religion and community to which she cherishes belonging to:

⁴ Farzana Doctor, *Seven* (Toronto: Dundurn Publishers 2020), p. 14.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 117.

⁶ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 14.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998).

⁸ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 14.

⁹ Yasmin Hussain, *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge 2016), p. 13.

I have always loved my community. My Dawoodi Bohra community. It's the place I can return to, the place I belong, the one identity that is sure and strong. I have admired my family, and in particular, the women. But tonight I hate it. Hate them ... But now the community feels like nothing because, while the men might have made the rules, it is the women, women I've loved, who've enforced them.¹⁰

Later, at a nail studio in the airport lounge and on different other occasions, Sharifa says, "Despite its shortcomings, I still want to belong."¹¹ Perhaps the best descriptors of this diasporic identity have been theorized by Stuart Hall, who emphasizes processes rather than fixed states; becoming and being, past and future, having a history yet coming into existence, always mutable and changing.¹² For the immigrant and diaspora, identity creation and living are constantly becoming:

far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subjected to continuous play of histories, culture and power. Far from being grounded in the mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the name we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.¹³

Diaspora eschews the blanket category of the nation-state which homogenizes plurality and differences into assimilation. Farzana Doctor's diasporic consciousness arises, not because of her direct tangible, involvement with India by means of being born there or having made several visits to her ancestral country, but by way of her parents' associations, through their community stories, practices, struggles, and reminiscences about India. Doctor's diasporic consciousness does not make claims to conformity to the ancestral practices, it is rather her global and local association through cultural artifacts, transnational communities, cyberspace associations and shared imaginative field that are in operation.

Being a psychotherapist and a novelist, Doctor's writing critiques the practice of treating the horrendous as normal, because of the associated stigma attached to the idea of sexual pleasure as undesirable for women. Both the nation and female body become the dialogic site of activism, engagement, and contestation due to the systematic docility of the female body under patriarchy and the institutionalized domination of the nation's body by the state. Treating the issue of *Khatna* in literature, through an epistolary form, provides an uncomfortable yet highly volatile space for action, assertion, and advocacy, a capacitated zone wherein marginalized discourses can find powerful reverberations in diasporic communities. Robin Cohen posits that "awareness of their precarious situation may also propel members of diasporas to advance legal and civic causes and to be active in human rights and social justice issues."¹⁴ Appended to this heightened self-

¹⁰ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 220.

¹¹ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 234

¹² Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 225.

¹³ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', pp. 225-226.

¹⁴ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 13.

awareness is the fringed religious diaspora consciousness as theorized by Steven Vertovec who puts the onus of expounding the “religion of these diasporic denizens on them, which creates an emotional distancing, an ability to create detachment and remoteness, from *being* religious to a religious *mindedness*, which helps to pragmatically breakdown and rationalize the inherent structures of the practices in religion.”¹⁵ This appears through fictional scenes, as imagined by Doctor, who herself is a survivor of *Khatna*. Samir Dayal argues, “it is equally dangerous to sequester the marginalized by representing their struggles merely in terminological and conceptual opposition to the metropolitan critique of ontopology.”¹⁶ The interstitial perspective so formed still does not address complexity or resist homogenization. Dayal reiterates,

The self’s migrancy in negotiation is given a special saliency in the case of the migrant self. And there could hardly be a more apt image for this double consciousness than the diaspora. Unmasking the denigrated other whose nearness is disavowed in the anxious repetition of the unitary sameness of the Euro-American self, diaspora functions as an exemplary figure for the idea of the fungibility of identity.¹⁷

Thus, the paradigm of double consciousness provides a precognition, a clairvoyant, critical and sensory structure, a watchful third eye.

Performing Gender Through Sexuality

Doctor also interrogates and problematizes the discourse of gender and gendered expectations within the Bohra community. The multiple dangling patriarchies which intend to regulate and rigidly control feminine sexuality and its hetero-normative structures through the everyday practice of religion are laid bare in *Seven*. This denotes the gravity with which *Khatna* finds an unproblematic acceptance among the men and women of the community. The exposition of this coercive oppression in the name of *Khatna* is engineered through fiction which becomes recuperative in nature to release the conscious, and subconscious nature of the aftermath of the sexual trauma. Written in this way, it resists the monolithic application of Western feminist discourse about the subaltern having no agency of their own. Doctor’s stand on this epistemic violence in such practices echoes transnational feminist solidarity on issues pertaining to gendered brutality, child abuse, and other similar violent practices like *Khatna* in Bohra communities. The whole point of *Khatna* or ‘Female Genital Mutilation’ had been to diminish and extinguish overt and pronounced sexuality, with the intention to discipline and gag women of their subjectivities and self-expressions in accord with the paternalistic society. Emanuela Finke opines that:

¹⁵ Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Samir Dayal, ‘Diaspora and Double Consciousness’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1996), pp. 46–62.

¹⁷ Dayal, ‘Diaspora and Double Consciousness’, p. 46

in all cultures, the shaping of the relationships among human beings and the establishment of socio-cultural norms is bound up with the exercise of power. The body is a symbol of reified power relationships because the social connections within a society also find expression in corporeal images. Control over people's bodies is thus, concomitantly, an expression of the social control being exercised within a society. FGM is best understood not as an isolated phenomenon but rather as the tip of the iceberg of asymmetrical gender relations.¹⁸

In order for this arrangement to prevail, women need to be controlled and checked via their bodies, as often the bodies become the locus of expression, assertion, and the consummation of the vital emotional force through the visceral and corporeal. Thus, the bodies also pose a dangerous site for illicit liaisons, a carcass with an explicit demand for carnal pleasures, thereby needing to be restrained and regulated. Enforcement of these repressive edicts was and has been fundamental to establishing and sustaining feudal and patriarchal ambitions.

Unchecked expression and agency over one's sexuality mean promiscuity, which causes a rupture of austerity in public and private spheres. The religious traditions lay emphasis on the idea of modesty and preserving a woman's piety, and *khatna* or *khafz*, as followed in many Daowadi Bohra communities, as a means to reduce sexual desires and retain sexual poverty. Becky Digan, in an anthropological study of various women around the globe who have undergone *khatna*, notes that at times, moral and cultural relativism leads to acceptance of some of the absurdist and brutal practices like genital mutilation.¹⁹ Digan references Rogaia M. Abusharaf's discovery of a deluded and converse logic of liberation with "circumcision is seen as the machinery which liberates the female body from its masculine properties, and for women she interviewed, it is a source of empowerment and strength."²⁰ A more informed view sees this as a case of cultural relativism,

the concern over cultural survival (the cultural right to practice their traditions), and the rights of the individual to choose circumcision are at the centre of the argument that anthropologists should not act as advocates to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation ... For example, Rob Winthrop (2001) argued that female circumcision maintains cultural pluralism and is not necessarily a human rights issue because we cannot identify what is universally bad or good for all people.²¹

At the heart of the writer's activist praxis is the critical and emotional attack, which is most pronounced in employing the critical trope of direct interrogation and irony through the potent character of Fatima, an epitome and recalcitrant prototype of defiance, who questions authorit

¹⁸ Emanuela Finke, 'Genital Mutilation as an Expression of Power Structures: Ending FGM through Education, Empowerment of Women and Removal of Taboos', *African Journal of Reproductive Health / La Revue Africaine de La Santé Reproductive*, no. 10 (2006), pp. 13–17.

¹⁹ Becky Digan, 'Human Rights and Human Rites: Advocacy, Relativism and the Issue of Female Genital Mutilation', *Lambda Alpha Journal* (2002), pp. 18–27.

²⁰ Digan, 'Human Rights and Human Rites', p. 22.

²¹ Digan, 'Human Rights and Human Rites', p. 18.

constantly. Fatima's radical renunciation of religion due to *Khatna* has the worst psychological and physiological consequences, the impossibility of leading a normal, healthy sexual life. At a community luncheon, when asked by Tasnim Maasi what is she teaching the child Zee, Fatima retorts, "The best lesson a Bohra girl can learn: to question authority!"²²

Fusing Doctor's social activism with literary art makes her a global critic of regressive and dangerous practices like *Khatna*. The dimensions of diaspora complicate the activist-cum-writer paradigm of the writer. Though radically different, the domains of community-oriented social activism and private narrativization find a combined and distinctive expression in the works of Farzana Doctor. Her purpose is to expose and thwart the hidden violent practice and to assert the worthiness of females in her Bohra community and other global communities. In minority communities, the issue of genital mutilation must be changed through having an understanding of female sexuality, and the existence of homosexuality as an alternative to heterosexuality. Heteronormativity is part of the regulative order, working in partnership with patriarchy and the oppression of women (through genital mutilation, as well as the denial of sexual choice). As Srikanth observed "Regulation of sex became oppressive and discriminatory to women only in a patriarchal family system based on the institution of private property ... The actual possibility of male domination appeared only after the development of private property and the institutionalization of the patriarchy."²³

Doctor transforms these experiences of her characters into a site of effecting change, by way of exposing the exploitative core of religion which usually operates very closely with the patriarchy. Internationally, the World Health Organization declares the practice of FGM "as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against girls and women. It is nearly always carried out by traditional practitioners on minors and is a violation of the rights of children."²⁴ The organization warns further that:

the practice also violates a person's rights to health, security, and physical integrity; the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; and the right to life, in instances when the procedure results in death. In several settings, there is evidence suggesting greater involvement of health care providers in performing FGM due to the belief that the procedure is safer when medicalized.²⁵

The practice is followed in substantially different parts of the world in different forms, with almost all of them having traumatic and medical consequences for a woman for her entire lifetime.

Exploring the causal attributions in the context of Indian Dawoodi Bohra, Asghar Ali Engineer examines the dialectical framework of the demands for humanitarian and democratic

²² Doctor, *Seven*, p.154.

²³ H. Srikanth, 'Marxism, Radical Feminism and Homosexuality', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 32, no. 44-45 (1997): 2900–2904.

²⁴ 'Female Genital Mutilation', *World Health Organization (WHO)*, 31 January (2025). At: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>.

²⁵ 'Female Genital Mutilation'.

rights by the educated/liberal Bohras leaders of the community faith. This demand for reformation within the sect has met with the use of coercion, brute force, and serious violations of speech, rights of dissent, and demonstration. Engineer highlights how the attempts to bring reformation even through dialectical engagements have received strong-arm tactics and even savagery against its own community practitioners. At the third 'All World Dawoodi Bohra' conference in Bombay in 1981, Engineer describes "all-age group Bohra women" present during the conference as well as during the dialectical exchanges citing personal narratives of recollections, stories and testaments of trauma. Engineer mentions that many civil liberties leaders like VM Tarkunde of PUCL, Gobinda Mukhoty of Delhi PUDR and Vijay Tendulkar of CPDR, were also present. Besides, a large number of writers and intellectuals actively participated in the broader reform movement, fuelling the currents of change in Indian society."²⁶ Attempts to disrupt, prohibit and denounce the proceedings with resistance such as marches towards the venue were made. Engineer notes how it was not a case of hired goons or hooligans; rather "most unscrupulously even women in purdah and school-going children were used to parade. . . many reform delegates, both men and women, were beaten up by hoodlums. Stones, sticks and soda water bottles were used and many policemen were injured."²⁷ The Nathwani Commission appointed by the Citizens for Democracy forum by Jayprakash Narayan, in its 220-page report by judge N. P. Nathwani in 1977 found "large scale infringement of civil liberties and human rights of reformist Dawoodi Bohras at the hands of the priestly class headed by the Syedna."²⁸ As per the ritualistic entree to the community, from cradle to the grave, the Bohras are subjected to the juggernaut Syedna through the *misaq*, which is an oath of allegiance or initiation, a necessary staple to living as a "good Bohra woman." From wedding cards bearing "slave of Syedna" to taxes and requiring permission to pursue education, law abiding Bohras must prostrate themselves to mark their reverence to the Syedna. Failure to follow the guidelines invites *baraat*, a kind of social boycott, creating ostracization, social backlash, the canceling of whole families, wrecking homes, and dividing families.

Resistance Through Narration

The multiplicity of voices through Zenaib, Fatima, Tasnim Maasi, Sharifa's mother, Zee, Nasrin and even Murtuza, appear as an interaction of different ideologies, with the 'power to mean' through Sharifa or the author herself continuously fizzling through these disparate substantiations. The discourse on *Khatna* generated, therefore, does not unfold logically, it rather is interactive and provides a plural consciousness with a holistic perspectivization of the "problem" for Bohra women. With Fatima and Zanaib particularly, it articulates the polarities of experience and its viability. These polyphonous voices serve as crucial narrative props as part of a literary praxis that

²⁶ Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Dawoodi Bohra Reform Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 16, no. 15 (1981), p. 652.

²⁷ Engineer, 'Dawoodi Bohra Reform Movement', p. 652.

²⁸ 'Nathwani Commission finds atrocities committed by Syedna Saheb on Dawoodi Bohras', *India Today*, 12 January (2015). At: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/religion/story/19790531-nathwani-commission-finds-atrocities-committed-by-syedna-saheb-on-dawoodi-bohras-822060-2014-03-12>.

refuses to simply be propagandist literature. These plural sensibilities swim above the Manichean dualism of good and evil, and are dialogically nuanced which chronicles the deep-rootedness of its presence in the reality of everyday life. It is this domain of narration that is converted into a democratic space which lets ‘the competing voices over their views of *Khatna* and other routine practices in *heteroglossia* which are subjected to be questioned instead of flattening out to express a single belief system and/or to give a verdict upon it. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of ‘Heteroglossia and Dialogism’ pointed out that,

The dialogical word is always in an intense relationship with another’s word, being addressed to a listener and anticipating a response. Because it is designed to produce a response, it has a combative quality (e.g., parody or polemic). It resists closure or unambiguous expression and fails to produce a ‘whole’. It is a consciousness lived constantly on the borders of other consciousnesses.²⁹

It is this dialogic discourse around ‘*Khatna*’ that functions as a centrifugal force around which *Seven* revolves. The author, in a bid to normalize a descant around a tabooed subject has a number of female characters creating intrinsic community dialogue around *Khatna*. Zenaib’s ill-informed justifications about *Khatna* as a way to stay faithful to her husband, and as part of growing up as a necessary “rite of passage,” or Tasnim Maasi’s reasoning, “This is how things are done, that this is just part of our religion, our culture. We are the Bohras and at thirteen we went through our *mithaq* during which we pledged our allegiance to our holy leader and we must do what he says. He says *Khatna* is good for girls because it helps us to be Naik, good and modest and faithful”³⁰ to Fatima’s feelings of permanent sexual deformity and psychological wounds of betrayal, shock, and isolation. Thus, the “different perspectives put forth by these characters are not partial, but rather complementary truths. “The dynamic interplay and interruption of [these] perspectives is taken to produce new realities and new ways of seeing. It is [this] incommensurability that gives dialogue its power.”³¹ Doctor, through this medley of conversations, spruces up the narrative with simple wise utterances in commonplace colloquies and infuses feminist defiance at multiple places, carefully chosen to question and reveal women’s ways of life. Be it a simple stealthy remark about the different practices after spousal death for men and women - or a wisecrack on multiple occasions - “These subversions challenge the supremacy of the religious discourse, in this case, questioning the Syedna leadership, or even simple conformity to the community through ITS cards, wearing *ridas*, and so on. Whether it is gender-erasure through mainstream histories – “By the way, men dominate history in the US too. The women get erased”³² - or the invisibilisation of the work of women, who are treated as secondary actors whose deeds do not count, “All successful businessmen have quietly toiling women behind them. They look after their homes, their

²⁹ Andrew Robinson, ‘In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia’, *Ceasefire*, 29 July (2011). At: <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/>.

³⁰ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 227.

³¹ Robinson, ‘In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia’.

³² Doctor, *Seven*, p. 63.

children,”³³ or the different norms for a male and female after the spouse's death, men/the widowers grieving privately, silently and moving on, while women as widows sit in *iddat*, “not being allowed to leave the house for four months, no distraction, no entertainment.”³⁴

Insults and slurs are directed at women who choose to share their derangement and anguish; they are often called non-Bohras. Cultural contextualization plays a significant role in crystallizing and embodying the practice without overt resistance. It is this gradual sedimentation of the various aspects of oppression and exploitation typical in the Bohra community, “A beautiful spiritual community turned into a cult,”³⁵ as Fatima retorts at an occasion, which re-instates the author's fiction as a site of activism, subversion, transgression and her commitment to bringing the oppressed voices to the fore. By mainstreaming *Khatna*, the narrative transcends the sense of guilt and shame around the issue, an abyss of violence, child abuse, in silence and misery. While such practices act as fortification and vigilance for those who control female sexuality, men, the aim is to render the idea of female sexuality as non-existent, invisible, and incapacitated. This gender-based violence is excavated from the zones of silence; is unmasked and revealed in the public spaces to instigate clamour around a practice which enforces long-standing physiological and psychological damage in the name of cultural practices. It also gives glimpses of betrayal in the same households; elder members in whom girls as young as seven would place their trust, tie them to secrecy and stealth in a cloak and dagger manner. In praxis “Many health providers and non-FGM survivors are hesitant to address this issue because they feel it is not their place to speak on such a ‘cultural’ practice, but FGM is not mandated by a culture other than that of patriarchy and sexism—something we are all part of.”³⁶ Doctor commented “I try to always link [FGM] to this continuum of sexual and gender-based violence; it's not that different from rape culture.”³⁷ In the text, Zee at the denouement reveals “like every other *Khatna* story you'll hear, it's about secrets, lies and shame.”³⁸ The betrayal by the women of their own kind is not only detrimental to one's psychosomatic health but also creates a deep sense of distrust throughout one's life. To the religious obeisance, women and children become easy targets upon which the diktats of the clerics accentuate and intensify their supremacy. Zee recalls in her agony and affliction,

She said the antiseptic might sting for a second, and told me to look out the window so that it would hurt less. I did, and so I didn't see what actually happened ... I believe Maasi tended my knee while the other woman cut my clitoral hood, and while I felt pain in both places, I was confused about what was hurting where. And why ... Remember, this was a decade ago; I was only seven.³⁹

³³ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 64.

³⁴ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 67.

³⁵ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 112.

³⁶ Andrea Panaligan, ‘What sex and healing are like for survivors of female genital mutilation’, *Lithium Magazine*, 18 February (2002). At: <https://lithiummagazine.com/2022/02/18/what-sex-and-healing-are-like-for-survivors-of-female-genital-mutilation/>.

³⁷ Panaligan, ‘What sex and healing are like for survivors of female genital mutilation’.

³⁸ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 401.

³⁹ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 400.

Debunking and denouncing such a custom which usually is carried out clandestinely, becomes itself an act of community ostracization and violence. In the novel, Sharifa and her cousins are attacked with caustic insults and slurs once they open up: “They are not real Bohra women. Heretics ... should be better controlled by their husbands.”⁴⁰ Many feminist and queer writers and artists supporting the LGBTQ+ movements have produced their works within the activist-cum-aesthetic framework and have created characters and conditions with the narrativization using the personal and public life stories to initiate dialectical and dialogic interventions into current social practices.

Doctor’s oeuvre, being a relatively novel one, has created discord around the issue of FGM, as she also happened to be one of the survivors of the humiliation of genital mutilation, and a forthright and vociferous activist, campaigner, and reformer of global FGM movement to ban the practice. In one of the interviews Doctor states,

It’s such a taboo subject to speak about, and that’s why more people haven’t spoken out. But there’s a bit of a #MeToo movement around FGM that’s happening, which is great. For example, we used to think that it only happened in Africa, and then we learned about the Middle East and India and across Asia. And now we’re hearing survivors come forward from Russia, from Colombia and South America, and in recent years from white Christian women in the US.⁴¹

In the novel, Sharifa calls it a “micro-movement.”⁴² The final blow comes to Sharifa when she discovers Abdoolally’s past and her own daughter Zee’s *Khatna* have been done illicitly. Abdoolally’s wife had left him due to his obstinacy that the practice must be carried out on her daughter, and later Sharifa’s own daughter Zee was taken to the cutter at seven in Sharifa’s absence, despite Sharifa’s public opposition to *Khatna*. Doctor writes:

If Abdoolally’s story has taught me anything, it’s that we each have the power to be a part of our community’s legacy. We have the power to leave archaic practices behind and create new wealth for our women. We can protect future generations of daughters, not allow them to be broken by violence.⁴³

Islamic Feminism and Global Feminisms

It is here that the third-world feminists, who work on the diverse grounds of race, gender, nation, and class to engage with the experiences of women in migration, refuse to be accommodated by

⁴⁰ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 385.

⁴¹ Panaligan, ‘What sex and healing are like for survivors of female genital mutilation’.

⁴² Doctor, *Seven*, p. 386.

⁴³ Doctor, *Seven*, p. 397.

Western feminism and its “feminist blindness,”⁴⁴ which promotes a Eurocentric universalist idea of womanhood. Ellen Gruenbaum observes the invisible Western hegemony, where “the anti-FGM” polemics of particularly American authors, have “damaged the sense of respect for the transnational sisterhood on this issue.”⁴⁵ Feminist universalism contributes to essentializing gender experience, which often overlooks the distinct structural suppression unique to particular cultures. In such cases, cultural contextualization and mutual assimilation and accord play a significant role in de-essentializing these practices. Critics of feminism have pointed out an almost insincere non-recognition of the diverse and disparate structures of oppression among Third World women, and women of different color, ethnicity, race, class and gender, which makes them more disenfranchised, dis-entitled, and devoid of agency. This hegemonic cultural imperialism has panoptically embraced the concerns of all women with the idea of “Universal womanhood”, homogenizing diverse experiences as an unproblematic category. As Rosi Braidotti establishes “the Third World Woman’s knowledge production has occurred on the part of Western feminists who have colonized the material and historical heterogeneity discursively.”⁴⁶

Rupturing this significant gaze of “being looked at” and/or “watched over,” Doctor’s stance becomes multi-tiered defiance against the practitioners and perpetrators of *Khatna*, as well as the Western coterie of feminists who usually dismiss aspects of different practices under Islam in absolute evil terms. In the world of the critical and the academic, Doctor’s novel becomes an intransigent refusal to sublimely co-habituate with oppression brought out by feminists of different cultures. Sara Salem states, “Islam has played a central role in the feminist debates, and has consistently been defined as being outside the parameters set by western mainstream feminism and thus as intrinsically patriarchal.”⁴⁷ This does not negate the fact, however, that, to many women, Islam forms a central aspect of their lives and their lived experience. While religion itself is a contested term, there is little doubt that for many it provides a spiritual framework through which to view and experience the world. This spirituality serves as a counterpoint to the domain in which rationality is valued above all other meaning systems, a metanarrative of secularization.

Conclusion

Literature brings to reality events and feelings that are ignored without question, and which if not modulated, lead to the ossification of structural, longitudinal, and latitudinal injustices across generations. FGM, which was seen more as a celebratory practice, a moment of joy/milestone among many communities (or possibly their male leaders), is a material embodiment of sanctified brutality in order to retain supremacy over women in these communities. Deforming female bodies

⁴⁴ Elina Vuola, ‘God and the Government: Women, Religion, and Reproduction in Nicaragua’, paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), Washington DC (2001).

⁴⁵ Ellen Gruenbaum, ‘Feminist Activism for the Abolition of FGC in Sudan’, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, (2005), pp. 89–111.

⁴⁶ Rosi Braidotti, ‘In Spite of the Times: The Post-secular Turn in Feminism’, *Theory, Culture & Society* (Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2008), p. 22.

⁴⁷ Sara Salem, ‘Feminist Critique and Islamic Feminism: The Question of Intersectionality’ (2024). At: https://www.academia.edu/6789673/Feminist_critique_and_Islamic_feminism_the_question_of_intersectionality.

through certain repeated “performativity within a highly rigid regulatory frame”⁴⁸ is to control women’s agency in sexuality, and to enforce male-dominated normative heterosexuality. Doctor’s resistance through narrative clears the space for understanding the truth of such experiences and actualizes a (guilt-ridden) insurrectionist scope beyond critiquing or chastising or subversion. Farzana Doctor’s *Seven* is rather a breakthrough portrayal, fusing art and advocacy beyond academic advocacy. Not only reciprocation and resistances must come from all art forms, but also there is a need to collectively advocate to de-centre the hegemonic misconstructions behind these practices that barbarize and dehumanize women’s lives.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).