

# THE PORTRAYAL OF MARYAM AND FARAH UNDER PATRIARCHAL CULTURE IN MEERA SYAL'S *MY SISTER – WIFE*: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Maryam dan Farah sebagai istri yang dipoligami oleh Asif hidup dalam budaya patriarki. Budaya patriarki merupakan budaya yang menempatkan posisi laki-laki lebih tinggi dari posisi perempuan. Dalam menganalisis, penulis menggunakan teori Feminist Betty Friedan berdasarkan bukunya *Feminine Mystique*. Melalui analisis yang dilakukan, penulis menyimpulkan bahwa ketika hidup dalam budaya patriarki, Maryam dan Farah memiliki sikap yang berbeda baik menerima atau menolak tradisi poligami. Hal ini dipengaruhi oleh latar belakang kehidupan mereka yang berbeda. Selain itu, penulis juga menyimpulkan bahwa baik Maryam maupun Farah merasa menderita hidup sebagai istri yang dipoligami karena ketidakadilan yang dilakukan Asif dalam memberikan perhatian, perasaan cemburu, tertekan, dan tidak dihargai yang dialami istri, serta perasaan takut ditinggal suami. Baik Maryam dan Farah saling berkompetisi dengan melakukan segala cara untuk mendapatkan perhatian Asif. Penulis berharap penelitian ini bisa memperkaya pengetahuan kita tentang kehidupan perempuan yang hidup dalam budaya patriarki.

**Keywords:** Menderita; Patriarki; Perempuan; Poligami

### 1. Introduction

Patriarchy is a culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. According to Tyson, "Patriarchal cultures have been used very successfully to justify inequities, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision making position in the family and politics (2006: 84)." This inferior position of women is culturally, not biologically, produced and it still continues to assert in our world. As a result, many women experienced discrimination and oppression under the authority of men. Sexist stated that patriarchy promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief makes women suffering because indirectly their positions are under domination of men.

In patriarchal culture, women are supposed to be feminine; submissive, obedient, modest and frail. It is not feminine to succeed in business, to be extremely intelligent, to earn much money and to have strong opinions. According to Tyson (2006:85), "Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive." If women accept their traditional gender roles and obey the patriarchal rules, they are considered as "good girl" but if they don't, they are considered as "bad girls". The good girl is satisfied by serving her family and never gets angry to do her duties as woman. In Victorian culture in England, she was called the "angel in the house" who made the home a safe haven for her husband, where he could spiritually fortify himself before resuming the daily struggles of the workplace.

These traditional gender roles happen in almost every sphere of the world including in Pakistani culture. According to Ahmed, "Some Pakistani women are treated only as second-class citizens in many ways. Following traditions of patriarchy, they are subject to systematic subordination to men, to various degrees across all levels of society and in all regions (2005:236)." The images of women in Pakistan are submissive and oppressed.

Some women in patriarchal culture must share their husband with others or well-known as polygamy. This situation shows that woman on that position is very weak. As a result, many women experiences suffering and they cannot get their husband fully because they have to share their

husband with the other wives. Besides, some women are not allowed to have career because their duties are to stay at home, serve their husband and raise their children.

To overcome those problems, some women have tried to show their existence and fight for this negative stereotype. They use media such as television, newspaper, and literary works including novel, drama, poetry and film to voice their existence. Through literary works, women can convey their minds and feelings about what they experienced. Some of the works are daring enough since they describe about women's experiences that live in patriarchal society.

One of the works is *My Sister Wife* drama written by Meera Syal. Meera Syal was studying English and Drama at Manchester University, when her stage play, *One of Us*, came to the attention of the BBC. According to Chandra (2011), "Syal was commissioned to write her first television script, on the subject of Pakistani marriage. She relished the opportunity, pointing out that the pleasure of writing as an Asian woman is the pleasure of exploding stereotypes." *My Sister Wife* is one of example of the damaging effects of traditional, stereotypical gender roles, particularly for women. It was written in 1992 and was joint winner in the TV Drama category of the *Commission for Racial Equality's Race in the Media Award*.

*My Sister Wife* drama tells about the competitions of a Pakistani man's two wives, Maryam and Farah for their husband's devotion. From the drama we can see that although Asif lives in London but he still maintains Pakistani tradition like Polygamy. Asif's wives are Pakistani women but they actually have different background of cultures. It makes them engage in a cruel battle to win for their husband's affection. The women live under the authority of Pakistani husband and they are frighteningly expressive in their silence. In this study, the writer finds that the issue of the drama is clearly about patriarchal culture experienced by Maryam and Farah.

*My sister wife* provides an example of women who live under polygamous marriage. This drama is one of the representations of gender stereotype experienced by Pakistani women. Those women do not have the power to fight since the tradition and norms still discriminate them. The patriarchal system has successfully blinds the women to believe that they are under men's authority. In this condition, both Maryam and Farah are equally suffering under patriarchal system.

In analyzing the issue of the story, the writer will use feminist theory by Betty Friedan based on her book *Feminine Mystique*. According to Friedan, "Women are the victims of patriarchal system belief which requires them to find identity and meaning of lives through their husbands and children (2001:311)." She also states that women are domesticated by telling them that true feminine women are those who are able to be good wife and mother.

Firstly, the writer will analyze the patriarchal cultures that operate in the drama, including Domestication of Women, the Image of Ideal Women and Polygamy Matter. Then, the writer elaborates Maryam and Farah's reaction toward the patriarchal culture, whether they accept or resist it. Next is the discussion about the competition between Maryam and Farah for their husband's love. And the last is how they suffer to live in polygamous marriage.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 Domestication of Women

In the drama, the operation of patriarchy can be seen through the domestication of women such as serving her husband, looking after her children, and performing household chores like cooking and cleaning. While men dominate the activities related to economics. Men become the center of family and society, while women are a part of property of men. According to Friedan women are domesticated because the patriarchal system states that to be the true feminine, they must be able to be good wives and mother.

According to Friedan:

Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breast feed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands. (2001: 13)

The domestic role is represented by the character of Maryam who is the first wife of Asif. She carries out her duties as obedient wife and precious servant. Maryam always serves her husband,

washes his shirts, takes care of the family, sexually satisfies her husband, etc. It can be seen from Farah's saying (the second wife) when she knows Maryam's routine in the house. "Nothing much. Three months of married bliss and I hardly see her. She's got her own routine, shopping, the kids. . . . (153)."

While Asif as the husband plays role as the financial provider who works outside the house, earn money and does not allow her wife to work outside. It is shown when Asif says to Maryam "And I don't like you working. I provide you with everything you need (181)." As the financial provider, Asif sometimes invites his colleague or friends to discuss business or career in his house. While Maryam is busy in the kitchen to serve the guests. She is supposed to be responsible to the daily tasks and all housework. It seems that she has no life of her own, but essentially revolving around the life of her husband.

## 2.2 The Image of Ideal Women

As explained above that in traditional gender roles, men are seen as rational, intelligent and strong while women are supposed to be feminine, frail, obedient and frail. In patriarchal culture, women are supposed to be feminine; modesty, submissive, and nurturing. It is not feminine for women to succeed in business, have career and extremely intelligent

According to Friedan:

They could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training...how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting. (2001: 15-16)

Women who obey the traditional gender roles are considered "good girls". It is represented by the character of Maryam because she follows the traditional gender roles by becoming feminine woman. She knows how to catch his husband's attention and keep him happy. In contrast, women who violate traditional gender roles are thought of as "bad girls", especially if they violate the rules of sexual conduct for patriarchal women, such as dressing or behaving in a manner that could be considered sexually provocative. Like what Asif says to Farah when she begins to care his shoulders "Seduction, is what our women are supposed to be good at (162)." From the dialogue, it seems that Asif does not like Farah's deed because woman is not supposed to be sexually active or seductive.

Moreover, Sabia (Asif's mother) seems more attracted to Maryam who obey patriarchal norms while Farah is considered as violating the rules of sexual conduct of patriarchal woman, "Farah thinks sex will keep him happy, huh Maryam knows what love is. She washes all his shirts by hand (157)". She emphasizes that the way to attract husband is not by seducing him but fulfilling domestic roles like Maryam does. It makes Farah categorized as "bad girl" since she does not obey the patriarchal rules that to be feminine women must do household tasks, serve the husband rather than being career woman and having big job.

## 2.3 Polygamy

Polygamy is a form of plural marriage in which a man is permitted more than one wife (Zeitzen 9). Polygamy is also one of the products of patriarchal culture in which men have authority to have more wives. According to Zeitzen, as women become more emancipated, better educated and increasingly independent socially and economically from their families and husbands, polygamy is seen by many as a form of 'development reversal', a wrong direction to take with respect to gender relations.

In this drama, polygamous marriage is represented by the character of Asif, a Pakistani man who has two wives; Maryam and Farah. As a polygamous husband, he is categorized as a man from middle class who can afford to provide both of the wives in financial matter. However, capable to fulfill in financial matter does not guarantee his wives to feel secure to live in that polygamous marriage because he also has to give them equal love and intention. Yet, equal love is almost impossible since as a husband, he tends to love one of the wives.

Asif's polygamy has got permission from Maryam, the first wife. Farah as the second wife knows that Asif has a wife but she learns that Asif and Maryam has been apart for years so she

thinks that there is a big chance for them to divorce. Moreover, his first marriage has never been registered in London. After marrying Asif, Farah finds that Asif still often spend the night with Maryam. It makes Farah jealous, suspicious and painful to learn that her husband lie to her. It seems that Asif is not well aware of the negative psychological consequences polygamy might have for his wives and the conflict that might arise between his wives.

In polygamy, men must treat their wives kindly, transparently, and equally so that there will be no conflicts among them. However, Asif is not transparent with Farah about the fact that he still sleeps with Maryam. Besides, he does not give them equal treatment that makes them feel secure and valuable so it makes them engage in a cruel conflict to get his affection. In this case, Asif as a polygamous husband is not fair with their wives. He tends to love only a wife who can fulfill his desire and please him. Whenever one of his wives cannot satisfy and please him, he goes to the other wife. It makes women's position weak and they feel inferior because of guilty feeling of not making the husband satisfied.

Actually, according to Maryam ,Asif's reason of polygamy is because he expects a son from the second wife since she cannot fulfill his desire, "Then the girls were born. I didn't give him a son. He was so disappointed (171)." In patriarchal culture, having a son is more expected than a girl so when Maryam cannot have a son, Asif becomes disappointed and makes it as a reason to polygamy. Although, she cannot give him a son but as a wife, Maryam has served her husband very well therefore Asif's decision to take second wife only subordinate Maryam's position as a woman. Al-Krenawi and Graham said that such women may perceive an unequal treatment among wives, and typically dislike this inequity. However, the expression of these feelings may not occur because of women's subordination or the inequality of resources (6).

#### 2.4 Maryam and Farah's Reaction of Polygamy

Since both Maryam and Farah have different personal background, it makes them have different reaction of Asif's polygamy. Maryam, as a patriarchal woman does not against her husband when he asks permission for polygamy. Since she believes that men have right to practice polygamy as stated in Koran, besides polygamy tradition has been maintained by some people around her. Al-Krenawi and Graham stated that some people may have grown up in polygamous familial contexts, or may be familiar with polygamy through grandparents or other close relatives. In all respects, the previous practice of polygamy within a family could well pave the way for its acceptance in the present generation (12).

Maryam's acceptance of polygamy is influenced by people in her family and community who also practice polygamy and consider it as a way of life. Besides, she also has low educational level because it is seen in the drama that Maryam still very young to marry Asif. Moreover, her acceptance of patriarchy is due to the fact that she has lived in Pakistan for long time. As explained by Bari and Moghadam that women in Pakistan are oppressed by the local tradition and value (236). In this case, Maryam is a victim but does not aware of the abuse she got because she is programmed by the patriarchal system to believe that women are under men's domination.

For Maryam, polygamy can reduce her burden to have a son. At first, the husband really expects her to give him a son. It makes her afraid of not fulfilling his desire because she is the only wife. But after he takes the second wife, Maryam feels safe and not scared of him anymore.

However when the second wife gets pregnant, Maryam is worried that Asif leaves her. She realizes the condition that if Asif leaves her, she has to be independent to live without financial support from her husband. Then she decides to work outside to provide herself in financial matter. As she says to Asif "Farah's in the house now. Besides if you leave me, I'll need to be able to support myself, won't I Asif? (181)." At that time, Asif does not agree with Maryam's decision to work outside but Maryam, for the first time, dares to argue Asif. That's the first time Maryam can express her feeling and do what she wants. It is the great movement of Maryam to be more independent and escape from patriarchal culture that blinds her.

In here, we can see that polygamy can bring effect to Maryam. Since the second wife gets pregnant and will win Asif's love, it makes Maryam realizes that she has to support her own self

financially without the help of Asif. Maryam who is at first a very dependent woman but now turns to be more independent woman. Since she works outside, she changes the way she gets dressed. At first, she uses traditional Pakistani wife. However, after she gets a job, she wears modern clothes and new hair cut.

Compared to Maryam who at first submissively accept to live in polygamy, Farah tends to refuse polygamy since she believes that polygamy disadvantages for women. Farah as the second wife is portrayed as independent, intellectual and career woman. She is not a passive woman who submissively accepts to live in polygamy. When she finds out that her husband still spend the night with Maryam, she starts to argue and oppose Asif on the ground that he has lied to her about leaving Maryam. As she says to Asif "So that's why we have separate bedrooms. When are the other two moving in? (157)".

Farah's reaction is important in this case because it shows that as a woman, she does not want to share her husband with others. It can also be seen as her way to refuse polygamy. She does not see herself inferior since she can support her own life and does not need to depend on her husband. The absence of Asif's economic support did not significantly affect her financially. When she knows her husband still sleeps with Maryam, she feels humiliated and betrayed because she is a respected woman of the intellectual community.

Farah feels desperate and unhappy to live in polygamous marriage, she then decides to end her suffering by leaving Asif and starting her own life without Asif's domination. She says "I'm leaving. Out of my way. Get out of my way! (181)." This reaction is important to show that as a woman, Farah does not let herself subordinated by men. She wants to escape from patriarchal culture that has made her suffered and put her position under man's authority. She decides to choose what best to herself without considering what people say about her action.

However, in her way out, she vomits and discovers that she is pregnant. Pregnancy makes Farah changes her mind about leaving Asif because she believes that she can win Asif's love by the presence of the baby. She hopes that the baby will make Asif come more to her so that she can possess Asif by herself without Maryam's disruption. Then, she continues to compete with Maryam for Asif's love.

### 2.5 The Competition between Wives

Polygamy can create a competitive situation between the wives because both of them attempt to get their husband's affection as hard as they can in order to be his only wife. Moreover, Maryam and Farah live in one house of Asif and that makes them engaged in a cruel battle to win the commitment and love of their husband. There are some ways of Maryam and Farah to get their husband's affection. Some of Maryam's ways are by always keeps him happy; never argues Asif's words, cooks Asif's favorite food, sexually satisfies him, and fulfills domestic roles.

Maryam puts her position under Asif's authority. It seems that Asif as a patriarchal man is more interested in women who perform as 'good girls'; feminine, submissive, obedient and modest. And Maryam knows well how to attract his husband in order to come more to her. She thinks that the way to keep a man happy is by becoming modest and silent woman. Like she says "Western woman, what do they know? They think knowing lots of positions and silly underwear keeps a man happy but what about modesty? Silence (173)." Here, Maryam wants to ridicule Farah who cannot satisfy Asif. She thinks that the way to make him happy is not by becoming career woman or seductive woman. For her, the most important things are modesty and silence.

While Farah's efforts are; stop working and learn to be patriarchal women, she stops taking pills in order to get pregnant because she thinks that having a baby will prevent Asif from leaving her. She also begs Asif to move out of the house in order not to be interfered by Maryam. But Asif cannot leave Maryam because he must take care of her and also their families are business partner.

The competition is getting crueler after Farah suffers miscarriage. Farah tries to poison her sister-wife because she thinks that her miscarriage is because she drinks a green 'health tonic' from Maryam which perhaps contains poison to endanger Farah's baby. She says "Kill one baby, start another. So you want to fight dirty, my sister-wife. I haven't even begun (189)". This negative

thinking leads her to poison Maryam back. She slips the drug into the carafe of water in Maryam's room. However, in the middle of the night Sabia and Farah are awoken by Maryam's scream because she discovers Asif dead. The one who drinks the poison is not Maryam but Asif.

## 2.6 Maryam and Farah's Sufferings

After analyzing the drama, the writer finds that both Maryam and Farah equally suffer to live in patriarchal culture because they live under man's domination and have no life of their own. They are expected to do such roles without taking their feeling into consideration. Women are seen as the bastions of honor and reputation of families, therefore placing their behaviors and actions under greater scrutiny and judgment by others. Like Fauzia said to Farah "You are a mirror. Everything you do reflects back on the people around you. You have responsibilities, a family name. Now you want to break up this family. What will people say? (179)". It is proved that women are supposed to keep their problems to prevent shame and tainting of the reputation of the family within community.

Maryam also suffers when Asif asks her to have an abortion since Asif wants a boy rather than a girl. Maryam said "I'm safe with you. Two wives, more chance of a boy. I'm free Farah. I'm not scared of him anymore (194)". From Maryam's statement, we can see that she is desperately burdened to give her husband a son. Then she permits him to take the second wife so that she can be free of that burden. She keeps frighteningly silent and obeys every Asif's words, though she suffers to live in that condition.

Besides, in polygamous marriage the husband's affection must be torn into two wives. Equal love is almost impossible since as a human being, a man will always tend to love one of his wives more than the other wife. They experience jealousy, suspicious, and afraid of being left by the husband. All they do is to please the husband even without taking their feeling into consideration. It is wives' duty to please their husband while the husband never tries to make the wives happy.

According to Mernissi (1975: 48):

Polygamy also has a psychological impact on the self esteem of men and women. It enhances men's perception of themselves as primarily sexual beings and emphasizes the sexual nature of the conjugal unit. Moreover, polygamy is a way for the man to humiliate the woman as a sexual being; it expresses her inability to satisfy him.

According to a research about *Life and Marital Satisfaction and Mental Health of Women in Polygamous and Monogamous Marriages*, women who live in polygamous marriage have higher psychological distress than women in monogamous marriage. It is because of jealousy, competition and acrimony between co-wives, especially when the wives live in one house (6). The environment in the home becomes stressful. This condition is clearly portrayed in the drama.

Compared to Maryam, Farah experiences more suffering. It is because Farah is not accustomed to live in patriarchy. She does not understand yet about wife's duty, responsibility, honor, modesty, and femininity. She must adapt in a culture that suffers her much because in that patriarchal culture woman who has a good job is considered as sexless. Epstein says that in patriarchy "The woman who takes her work seriously, the career woman, traditionally has been viewed as the antithesis of the feminine woman (23)".

This case has similarity with what happened in America as Friedan explains in her book "Feminine Mystique". At that time women could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights-the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. They are forced to have no dream to be career woman but to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. If a woman has problem, it is because something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. At that time, many women feel suffering but afraid of talking to other people (11).

Farah looks stressful, miserable and pale at the end of the story, it is quite different from Farah's appearance at the beginning of the story she married Asif. She looks smart and cheerful. She feels depressed to see Asif comes back to Maryam because she keeps asking him to move out. She feels guilty and thinks that it is her fault that cause Asif keeps away from her. In this condition, Farah

faces difficult position. The more she fights Asif, the more he comes back to Maryam. The suffering is getting serious when Farah miscarriages. The writer assumes that her miscarriage is due to the oppression she gets in patriarchy. Patriarchal expectation of having a son has worried and burdened her. She suffers psychologically, sometimes she even has an illusion of talking with Asif's other four wives in fact they are just in Farah's mind. Like explained in the stage direction "*The women are lit in such a way, we cannot be sure whether they are real or in Farah's mind (191).*"

### 3. Conclusion

From the analysis above, the thesis writer comes up with the conclusion that the patriarchal culture strongly operates in the drama, including domestication of women. Domestic roles of women can be seen in Maryam's character that carries out her duties as obedient wife and precious servant. The other patriarchal ideology is about the concept of ideal women. It is not feminine for women to succeed in business, have career and intelligent. Women who obey this concept will be considered as 'good girl' and if not, they will be considered as 'bad girl'. The next patriarchal ideology is Polygamy. It is a form of plural marriage in which a man has more than one wife at the same time. In the drama, Polygamy is practiced by the character of Asif who has two wives, Maryam and Farah. We can see that polygamy only subordinates women's position since they are seen only as sexual satisfier and child bearer.

Polygamous marriage brings so many effects for both Maryam and Farah. Firstly, it affects both Maryam and Farah's reaction toward polygamy itself. Secondly, it makes them engaged in a cruel competition. Maryam's ways are by serving her husband, fulfill domestic roles, and becoming obedient wife. She never complains or fights her husband. She knows well how to make her patriarchal husband come more to her. While Farah's ways are by stop taking pill in order to get pregnant, stop working, and try to poison Maryam. In this condition, both wives silently expressive in their silence. They feel unhappy, jealous, depressed, sad, neglected, lonely, and painful to live in that polygamous marriage.

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