

A tale of two sisters

*A review I wrote for my manuscript, Sheen Qaaf. Sheen Qaaf is a lexicon on the Urdu language that follows the life and experiences of a narrator who grows up in eastern Uttar Pradesh speaking Urdu, and finds to her surprise the language and its meanings unravelling and mutating over time. These fissures in language reveal not only the fragile nature of meaning making but the hierarchies, of religion, a colonial past, patriarchy and caste that mediate it. Sheen Qaaf is currently in its second drafting, but is available for perusal— **please feel free to request a copy!***

There is a moment in Sheen Qaaf where the narrator is sitting in a cramped room with several aunts, grandmothers and sisters for her own sister's haldi after the actual haldi ceremony. These women, even after attending a party, seem to have not lost any energy as they play the dholak to lewd songs like *Fevicol* and *Choli ke Peeche*. Burkhas come off and dupattas are snatched as the narrator's Ammi dances to *Lamba Lamba Ghoonghat*. It seems like that fond moment of sisterhood that may evoke nostalgia in women if they too have given their worries away to music, but the author undercuts it with a strange question.

"Must we be sisters to be this raunchy?" she asks. And rightly so— is the love for women and of women only rooted in sisterhood?

Sheen Qaaf struggles with this contradiction, because it is a story about this narrator and her love/hate relationship with her sister, and how the two navigate it as Subbo— the younger of the two— gets married. Set in Kanpur, it is marked by its time and space— the references to the city's Ghat and Hannah Montana playing on TV are hard to miss. However, both time and space keep going back and forth as the narrator's thoughts in this story— from Delhi to Kanpur and from watching Hannah Montana on TV in school to eating bacon at Ama restaurant as an adult. All events that happen in this story are rooted in and tied to this same spatiotemporal dimension, a point the author tries to drive home by contrasting these instances with moments of a much older history of Islam and Urdu.

This history makes the structure of the story, for its chapters are, interestingly so, divided not by numbers or titles but by words and their meanings. Each chapter shows us the narrator's meditation on a word— sometimes from its origin to the instance it was spoken in her own life. But these words are not reduced to mere meaning-making— the author brings forth several questions of religion through these words. Sometimes the narrator asks easier ones, like why would someone buy a rose itr if it doesn't smell like roses, and sometimes these questions bear an inexplicable absurdity and shock— much like a child asking adults stark questions that they may get a rap on the head for. Why are you wearing (a burkha)? Why must a rickshawala keep a roza then? Why would he who published the first printable copy of the Quran, that which got translated and republished and reedited and translated again and published a thousand more times until it reached our simple household where we read it every day without understanding any word, worry about women pleasuring themselves within all boundaries of morality?

The author balances the narrator on a tight rope between that childlike questioning that cannot bear a fully comprehensible and clear answer, and that adult who asks these questions to point out their irony as much as her own frustration. These questions are one of the few windows to our narrator, who otherwise provides us a god-like musing on incidents that may be amusing to read but make you sit back and question at the end, but why did you tell me that? In asking these questions the narrator is telling you exactly why she told you that — so that you can answer them for her as much as you answer them for yourself.

There is little the narrator reveals of herself in this story, she is somehow, and frustratingly so, always in the back with her questions. But one look beyond these questions and the almost too-knowing tone, one can read Sheen Qaaf also as a complicated— if not complex— view of womanhood. Subbo's relationship with Manno only foregrounds this story, but the background is dotted by several instances that mark a familiar womanhood of confusion, limitation, subversion and—in rare instances, assertion. The narrator's womanhood is so central to everything that happens to and around her that it becomes almost natural, and in becoming that natural almost backgrounded, to this story, such that it only becomes apparent when it is brought to conflict— in instances like that of her sister wearing a burkha or her grandmother calling her sister a *harrafa*. The author seems to forget that the narrator is a woman herself— and a queer one at that.

The flow of the story is sometimes breezy and other times erratic. The dialogue— which the narrator seems to be having constantly with the reader— may sometimes seem a little too pressing, a little whiny, but it seems to give character to a narrator we may know little about otherwise. The author seems deliberate and generous in her use of Urdu— it almost seems like a call to attention to this language, even if the book is written in English. There seems to be something the writer is trying to say about the Urdu language within this story, but one feels too occupied with Manno's relegation of events and information to properly meditate. The chapters flow as freely as the words of a dictionary, such that one is surprised on reaching the end. That's all that happened? I ask myself as the final chapter on the wedding appears and Subbo is finally married off and handed over to her *khuda-e-majaz*. Perhaps that is all that happened in Sheen Qaaf, but, unlike Manno, I don't seem to mind.