Socio-Cultural Role of “Marginalized”: Case of Almās from Tulambah

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Abstract

Social existence of marginalized communities is a well addressed issue in Pakistan. Marginalized communities attracted attention from different walks of life. Their social status and problems have been given voice by, both, academia and media. Most of the literature produced in this regard maintains a particular tone that presents the picture of ‘marginalized’ surrounded in the social difficulties, economics insignificance and political deprivation. This kind of treatment has kept the discussion in narrow binaries in which society, as a whole, has been held responsible for the plight of minorities and marginalized groups and communities

Keywords

Socio culture, Socio literature, technology, society, social issues

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Introduction:

Social existence of marginalized communities is a well-addressed issue in Pakistan. Marginalized communities attracted attention from different occupations. Their social status and problems have been given voice by, both, academia and media. Most of the literature produced in this regard maintains a particular tone that presents the picture of 'marginalized' surrounded in the social difficulties, economics insignificance and political deprivation. This kind of treatment has kept the discussion in narrow binaries in which society, as a whole, has been held responsible for the plight of minorities and marginalized groups and communities. This narration, in which society is held responsible and culprit, has not been questioned and potentially challenged in Pakistan. Existing literatures not only contains reductionist point of views but also lacks a pure socio-cultural analysis. It is also because of the fact that academic treatment of any socio-cultural aspects requires something more than mere relying on the ethnographic details. It deserves a rigorous methodological treatment besides a sound theoretical understanding. Women, transgender, menials, linguistics and sectarian minorities etc. constitute 'marginalized' in Pakistan. Their marginalization has been constructed on the basis of political, socio-economic and social deprivations. An expert socio-cultural and culture based scriptural investigation is still required to have an in-depth analysis. This article takes the case of a Tawaif and explains her multiple expressions of social existence. It argues for the presences of some potential venues of expressions of so-called marginalized communities in society that have been either missed or neglected in majority of studies. These venues are clearly mentioned in the cultural script of the region and are expressed by the socio-cultural developments. By doing so, for a moment, it relieves society of the main burden of responsibility. It presents a character of tawaif who is not only well versed in her profession but at the same time is taking part in social and political activities of her town. Her fame bestows upon the Tulambah, her town, a new identity in post-colonial Punjab.

Tawaifs; a brief background:

Tawāifs were one of the most important socio-cultural entities of our society, while, tawāif was a highly sophisticated paramour or courtesan, who had excelled in music and a specific kind of dance, called Muḡrā. The tawāifs have served and entertained nobles only, especially in the Mughal era (Vajpeyi, 2009). Furthermore, girls were trained at a very young age in arts like Kathak dance and singing like Thumrī and Ghazal, once they attained maturity in their art, they were believed to be ready to perform in Mahāfils and then they become tawāifs, high-profile courtesans who only entertained rich and nobles. Some of the people believe that young Nawābs were sent to these tawāifs in order to learn Tamīz and Tehzīb as well as the art of singing (Vajpeyi, 2009). Unfortunately, such high-profile status of the tawāifs was challenged during British rule especially when the tawaifs belonging to the institution were labeled as prostitutes. However, Vajpeyi (2009) further mentioned that the label of prostitution had developed an orthodox point of view with regard to the class of tawāifs in the society and the class was deprived of its status and was neglected by the society. However, till the partition the institution survived in different forms, many tawāifs became concubines of Mahārājas and wealthy individuals while some were invited on marriage ceremonies and other occasions in order to perform (Rao, 2019). Once these tawāifs were the main source of popular music and

dance but with the emergence of industry and recording centers, these tawāifs lost their importance. Though, they have been neglected by the society they, even in present days, exist and are still closely associated with the society as their performances and their participation are still considered to be an important part of any event of joy in almost all regions of our country, Pakistan.

With regard to the case of Almās, her community has a background in this profession. In an interview Fakhar Husain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) states that these people have come from Mīrpur Khās and they were called Pakhīwās, who traveled from place to place with their belongings, they are also called Khānabadosh. Fakhar Hussain further mentioned that many of them settled in Bahāwalpur, Rahīmīyār Khān, Khānpur Katorā, and Karor Pakkā. Their last settlement was in Tulambah and they all belong to the same family. Thus, the community from which Almas belonged to, has introduced many famous tawāifs to Tulambah and the region adjacent to it as well as other areas of the country. For instance, Zaydah Kanjīrī and Anwār Malangnī were leading tawāifs long before Almas has joined the profession. Anwār Malangnī was best among all the tawāifs with regard to singing in her times and a village was named after her as Surīlā in order to honor her for her singing. Besides Zaydah and Anwār, Barī Lālan was another famous singer that Tulambah has produced ever. She was an expert in Ghazal, Thumrī, and Kafi. Moreover, Nāsrā, Zuhraan, and Irshād were contemporary to Almās. Thus, Nāsrā was called Gulshan Kā Gulāb and Zuhraan was praised for her eyes. On the other hand, Irshād and Almās were first cousins while Irshād was famous for the singing of Ghazal and was titled as Irshad Ghazal Numā and Almās was famous for her singing Kafi, Dhamāl, Dance and her way of walking. In an interview Riaz Hussain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) said that Almās among them was one of the most famous tawāif of Tulambah from the 1950s to 2000 and she was a culminating figure with the end of whom an era of classical dance and singing reached to an end in the region of Tulambah.

Almas; an artist:

In the beginning of the interview Fakhar Hussain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) told that Almās was born to Zarrān approximately in the 1930s, in Muhāllah Mahār Shakorā, famously known for tawāifs in Tulambah. However, the name of her father is not known as these tawāif are mostly known by their mother's name. Her mother was also a singer and she availed the services of Chiniotī Nuts as well as Baghdādī Nuts in order to learn singing. Hence, according to an interview with Jafar Hussain Jāfrī (personal communication, May 4, 2019) Almās had followed the foot stapes of her mother and took classes of singing at the age of 14 to 15 years, from Meher Alī, Ghulām Haider and Niāz Alī who were famous singers of Chiniotī Nut family. Besides, Almās had also availed the services of Baghdādī singers. Thus, among the Baghdādī singers Mīr Alam Baghdādī, who was the teacher of her mother as well, taught her to sing in local language as well as Thumrī and Ghazal. Jafar Hussain went on saying that also she went to Husan Muhallah of Multān in order to enhance the skills of her singing and In order to attain finest training of classical dance and Mujrā she travelled to Lāhore's Hirā Mandī which was the center of dancing at that time, while Almās was trained by master Mushtāq in this regard.

The signing is one of the most important aspects of tawāif's life therefore, these tawāifs were first introduced by singing in different local festivals. Therefore, in an interview Almās' cousin

and colleague Irshād Maī (personal communication, August 20, 2019) mentioned that Almās started singing in 1948 and remained associated with this profession for at least 40 years. In her forty years of profession, she remained dedicated to it and earned name and respect beyond the boundaries of Tulambah and Jhang district. With the passage of time, she rose to prominence and became most famous figure who had played a vital role in creating an identity of Tulambah in the historical journey of the town. However, the town of Tulambah being surrounded by many shrines of Sufi saints hosts many Melās and Urs that were the most common traditions and festivals of the region. Among all these festivals the annual Urs of Shah Sādiq Nihang had provided the platform to tawāifs and made Jhang as the center of performance for them. Besides being a tawāif there was a spiritual element in the lives of tawāifs in Tulambah as they use to perform on the shrines in different regions. Thus, in an interview Ghulāb Alī (personal communication, May 4, 2019) said that Almās used to sing the Kafī of Lāl Shahbāz Qalandar in a very beautiful manners. Almās had performed on the shrine of Māmon Sher Bukhārī and at the Shrine of Shah Habib Ullah Gillian, Baghdād Sharīf. Besides, the shrines of her own town, she had performed on the shrine of Barī Imām that had become the source of her fame beyond the region of Tulambah.

Though Almās has started her career from singing Kafī but she mastered singing Dohrā, Mahiyā also. Thus, in most of her singing career, she mostly presented Dohrā and Mahiyā and it is stated that she used to sing Dohrā and Mahiyā in the local language and always presented in the finest way ever. Through her singing, she presented the culture of the region as Dohrā Mahiyā is the cultural poetry of Lahndā Punjāb that include the areas from Bakhar to Multān including Jhang and its adjacent regions like Chiniot and Tulambah (Awan, 2016). However, she rarely used to sing Thumrī that is one of the most difficult and oldest mods of classical singing in the Indian sub-continent yet she used to sing it very beautifully. But her expertise was in Dohrā Mahiyā that was sung by her in Rachnavī dialect of the local language. Henceforth, after the long duration of singing on festivals and functions in the year 1965 her singing was at its peak and she was the most demanded singer in the region. Moreover, at that time the body language of the singer also mattered along with her singing. In this regard during the interview Maqbūl Hussain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) mentioned that Almās had different style while taking start she used to take a deep breath and put one hand on her ear and the other hand waved in the air along with the throw of her loud but beautiful voice with full potential. The loud start, with a specific style and enthusiasm as well as full stress and emphasize on words enhanced the beauty of her singing. Such a pattern plays a vital role in creating an image of the artist as well as convincing the audience. However, Almās was best among all her contemporaries in this regard. Therefore, she had become a scale of judgment for the locals in order to judge the standards of festivals and functions. Moreover, perfection in every aspect creates some memories with the audience that is left behind by artists.

Thus, it shows that though she mostly used to sing Dohrā Mahiyā but she was a versatile singer. If she used to sing Dohrā most of the time, it was the demanded mode of singing as it was closely associated to the culture of the region. Therefore, there are some songs in the local language that had been sung by Almās. Though the song had not been composed by her yet people recall these songs with the name of Almās because as her way of singing had left imprints on the memories of people. Hence, Fakhar Husain (personal communication, June 6,

2019) expressed that songs like Khān Gharā De Band Vay Khānā, Pīpal dī Chotī Te, Lurhdī Kūnj Vendī and Assān beyqadrān nāl laiyan Vay akhiyān were few songs that had been frequently requested to Almās by the audience.

Dance is another artistic skill that is a prerequisite of a tawāif's profession and it is as much part of the culture in the region as singing. By dance, here we mean Mujrā and Dhamāl that was the socio-cultural reality of the region. The socio-cultural importance of Mujrā can be accessed by a statement made by Almās' brother Ghulāb Alī (personal communication, May 4, 2019) that a marriage ceremony was considered low graded if it had no arrangements of Mujrā, especially in Jhang. Further, he asserted that only Zamindārs had managed to organize the event of Mujrā on their marriages and for themselves only, no other local was allowed at the place of the event. Hence, according to interview with Fakhar Hussain (personal communication, 2019) in past the marriage ceremony lasted at least for eight days in which there were practiced many traditions, thus, Mujrā, among all, was one of the most important event in the eight days marriage ceremony. In a nutshell the Mujrā had become an integral part of any marriage ceremony of landlords in the region. The tawāifs were booked or reserved three days before the event of the marriage ceremony. Besides being invited on marriage ceremonies, these tawāifs were visited by many landlords on their residence in order to watch Mujrā. According to an interview with Saqlain Safdar (personal communication, August 20, 2019) there was a specific time to visit the residence of tawāifs and at that time there was neither restriction nor any threat of raid by police or other law enforcing agencies, as they had legal right to practice their profession and entertain their guests and audiences. However, Almās was one of the most prominent tawāif that had presented the socio-cultural reality of the region through her artistic skills of singing as well as dancing.

She had performed in folk Melas and Urs on the shrines of the Sufi saints. However, performance on Melas is quite different from the performance on the shrine. The performance on Mela was kind of Mujrā, while on shrines it is totally different in every respect and it is called Dhamāl. Maqbūl Hussain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) Almās' performance of Kathak on event in Channān village near the Jhang district and Vainipull was praised by the audiences. Further Maqbūl Hussain went on saying that whenever Almās used to enter the crowd people used to whisper that the fairy has come as she was famous for her walking style and she had great respect for her audience also.

Besides being a professional performers these tawāifs has a spiritual element that has remained dominant in the life of almost all tawāifs. They used to attend the urs of Sufi saints in the region for the sake of spiritual affiliation and performed Dhamāl on the shrines. Thus, Dhamāl, most probably, is presented on shrines of Sufis on their annual anniversary called Urs. As Tulambah and its adjacent areas are surrounded by many shrines, the Dhamāl, therefore, became the most common practice of the whole region. Furthermore, this form of dance has less to do with pecuniary purpose and more to do with spiritual affiliation. Therefore, along with the other forms of dance, Almās was famous for doing Dhamāl as well. She frequently visited the shrines of Shah Sādiq Nihang in Shorkot, Shah Habib Ullah Gilālnī in Baghdād Sharīf, Māmon Sher and many others. Almās used to go to the annual festivals and anniversary of Shah Sadiq Nihang of Shorkot in order to present Dhamāl, regularly. Riaz Hussain, an instrumentalist (personal communication, June 6, 2019) has confirmed that Almās was not only best at singing

and classical dance but she was best at Dhamāl as well, and she also visited the shrine of Shah Jiwrān and Pīr Fākhir-e-Sultān in order to present Dhamāl. He further stated that Dhamāl represents the selflessness and devotion of the devotee doing Dhamāl. As the Dhamāl is presented to prove love and affiliation that is free from desires and demands, in fact, it is the way of presenting oneself to one's Pīr-o-Murshid selflessly. Therefore, Almās had presented Dhamāl on the Shrine of many Sufī saints not for pecuniary benefits but for spiritual satisfaction.

Almas; social and political person:

As social being, as per to the culture of society, Almās was supposed to remain confined to her profession and professional activity but here in the life of Almās, the case was otherwise. When she stepped into the social activities, said Irshā Māī (personal communication, August 20, 2019) she had earned respect and developed good relations with her neighbors to the extent that she was always welcomed by them for tea. Further, Saqlain Safder, in an interview (personal communication, August 20, 2019) consolidated the argument that most of the people are of the view that Almās was the finest citizen of Tulambah and she had enjoyed cordial relations with other natives. According to a source, Almās was well aware of the other aspect of society as Fakher Hussain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) mentioned that she used to remain well-dressed all the time and it was very difficult to recognize her as tawāīf at first sight, it was only due to her dressing, body language and the manner of communication. Furthermore, she was conscionable and honest women, unlike, other tawāīfs she was aware of morals and ethics of the rest of the society. Riaz Hussain (personal communication, June 6, 2019) stated people were afraid of the word Kanjrī but in the case of Almās, she managed to have created space as well as respect for her in the society of Tulambah and whenever she used to come out of her home the people, especially her neighbors and shopkeepers use to offer her tea or drinks. Further he asserted that she was loving and caring as well as she had emotional relations and attachments with her neighbors. Therefore, she received respect in return from those people. Ghulāb Alī (personal communication, August 20, 2019) she was respectful to her crew members, in the case of stay in a far-flung area, she used to cook food for the whole of her crew which shows that she had cared for the people associated with her. Jaffar Hussain Jāfrī (personal communication May 4, 2019) after the death of her mother, she not only brought up her younger brother but she helped him go to school for primary education and later she helped her brother getting married and assisted her household morally and financially.

She had a quality of helping people in need that was a humanitarian aspect of her life. Saqlain Safdar (2019) Almas had helped Anjuman when she came to Tulambah in order to have treatment of a Sickness from a Hakīm . It was the time when Almās was well off financially and Anjuman had no competition of Almās in this regard he further claimed that Almās had assisted many poor families in Tulambah, such as Khokar and Bhatti brādrīs had received financial as well as moral assistance from Almās. Fakhar Hussain (2019) said Almās was fully aware of the social customs of the society, especially in the case of marital customs, therefore, she used to present Niundra to the family of the groom and adorned groom with garland and used to give gifts to the bridal. Therefore, she was admired and respected by the families of Landlords of the region.

Jaffar Hussain Jafri (2019) told that like other people of normal society Almās had performed Hajj and Zawārī in 1988 then she was called Māi Hājan. Hajj and Zawārī are other aspects that show spiritual affiliation and goodwill of her. Jaffar further told that Almās used to tell the beets regularly that means she was mindful of her religious and spiritual duties as well.

Irsha Mai (2019) said she was a principled woman and she had never lied as it happens sometimes that tawāif may take shelter in the shadows of lies but in case of Almās, it was otherwise. Moreover, it happens, at least once, in a tawāif's life that some of her clients sometimes come at door step to demand their spent money back but nobody has ever heard about such client of Almās, nobody had ever come to her doorstep to demand his money back, as she was truthful as well as faithful women. She never preferred to quarrel with anyone as she was calm natured and peaceful being. If there would be a fight or quarrel among her neighbors, she always tried her best to end the dispute by the reconciliation of the parties. Even she had ended many disputes among the people living in her neighborhood by being surety for the parties of disputes. Riāz Hussain (2019) stated that most of the time she was invited by the people or her neighbors for resolution of certain matters or for the discussion on some issues and her opinion on such matters were considered as important and meaningful. Therefore, because of her goodwill and politeness, she earned a lot of respect in the society she was part of. Therefore, she is still recalled in good words, irrespective of her profession by the people of her town. Thus, she created a standard of herself and she successfully maintained it throughout her life.

Besides being kind hearted and respectful to the people around her, there was another aspect of Almās' life that made her precedent for her own community and other members of the main stream society that was her participation in the political activities of the town. She had political influence at least on her own municipality and importantly, she was the first one among tawāifs of Tulambah who participated in local politics of the town. Though Almās was the first one to participate in political activities she was not the last one as she has mobilized other tawāif as well and after Almās, there were many others who followed her in the political activities of the town. All these activities on the part of the tawāifs were due to the endeavor of Almās and the reasons that has been told for her success in political activities is that she had no fraudulent behavior and she used to remain determined on her word and promises. Moreover, she was the Nambardār of all the tawāifs of Tulambah that made her respectable among the people of her own community. Ghulāb Alī (personal communication, June 6, 2019) as a Nambardār she used to resolve the disputes erupted between the members of her community and the decision made by Almās, in this regard, was taken as binding on both of the parties of the dispute. Fakhar Hussain (2019) mentioned that such status of Nambardār had led her to politics of municipality, as being an elder of her community she created a vote bank of her own. Later on, when she entered politics this vote bank proved to be a blessing for her because most of the politicians prioritized Almās in order to grab her vote bank to ensure their success. Mahar Nusrat Harāj (personal communication, August 20, 2019) told she had remained a lady councilor five times and throughout her political career, she remained associated politically to the Harāj group. However, Almās had got first chance to become councilor when the government of Pakistan had decided to create new administrative units in the 1970s and the area of her residence including her Muhallah was given the status of Mauza. Saqlain Safdar

(2019) stated that Almās, besides having vote bank as Nambardār, was strong enough financially as compared to her contemporary tawāifs. Therefore, besides having vote bank Almās had got financial Strength and support as well from the local landlords of the region. Riaz Hussain (2019) mentioned that when she had entered local politics there were approximately four hundred votes of her community registered in the voter list. Therefore, a politician of higher scale offered seat of a councilor to Almās in order to receive maximum votes of her community on the general election.

Mahar Nusrat Harāj (2019) told that Almās was selected on reserve seat for women as councilor for the first time, in second Local government election in Pakistan, in 1979 during general Zia's regime and at that time there was only one seat for the lady councilor. Saqlain Safdar (2019) stated that later on, she contested in the direct election of Baldiyah with "finger ring" as her electoral sign and she remained winner with distinction. In the direct election, she was not only voted by her own clan but by her neighbors as well. It was only due to her virtue with people as she remained very active in resolving the issue of other people besides her own community. Moreover, Irshad Māi (2019) under the chairmanship of Mahār Allah Dād, she participated actively in the construction of a basic aid center and a hospital in Tulambah. The hospital is still functional in the town and still providing services to the people. Moreover, she was elected in one election without having an opponent of her as everyone in her constituency was satisfied with her activities and behavior. Mahār Nusrat Harāj (2019) in 2000 the third direct election was held during General Perwaiz Musharaf's regime and Almās had got more votes among all four elected lady councilors. She contested fifth and last election of her under the chairmanship of her Mahār Nusrat Harāj. Saqlain Safdar (2019) during her last tenure, she struggled for the renovation of the road that is situated right in front of Muhalla Mahār Shakora, the residing place of tawāifs. According to Mahār Nusrat Harāj (2019) there used to be a session of the municipal committee on a regular basis and Almās used to participate in the session frequently. It was the custom that the session was started with the recitation of the Holy Quran and Nāt-e-Rasool. Thus, in a session after Tilāwat, Almās had recited Nāt-e-Rasool. It was very pleasing to hear Nāt in her voice as she had a beautiful voice. Maher had concluded by saying that besides being a tawāif, Almās had a dominant spiritual factor in her.

However, Almās had left a very strong legacy in the local politics of the town as her followers are still enjoying it. Thus, Almās was followed by Irshād Māi in the municipality politics. After Irshād, the wife of Ghulāb Alī contested and won the election on the behest of Almās. Later on, Almās' daughter, Farzāna became Nambardār of her clan and contested the election. In her first election, she won by receiving more votes than her chairman. However, due to her honesty and promise fulfillment, Almās is still remembered in good words even among the landlord class of the regions and the political circles of the region. As a counselor, she had worked for the welfare of women and she was a good dispute settler as well. Therefore, she is still recalled in golden words. At the end when she died she was living with one of the famous landlord of the region like a housewife with land and gold in her possession.

Conclusion:

Commonly, tawāifs remained confined to their profession and they do not prefer to mingle with the rest of the society. On the other hand, society does not accept them with an open heart rather it proves to be conservative about the status and activities of tawāifs. Though in the

remote past these tawāifs were treated with respect but in present days the world tawāif has been replaced by world Kanjrī that is used as an abuse in our society. But Almās had made difference to the long-standing negative perception of society towards tawāifs by participating in mainstream social and political activities. She had enjoyed cordial relations with well reputed families of the region and has been treated with respect by them. Thus, she broke all the taboos of society and built new narrative about tawāifs of the town. She had proved that the concept of people regarding tawāif is wrong; rather tawāifs have the capability of participating in social-political activities of the society and marginalized, suppressed and ignored communities can play a significant role in creating a positive scenario in the society if they are given opportunities and acceptance.

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