

## Mafia Queens of Mumbai- A feminist- psychoanalyst perspective

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### Abstract

The Mumbai Underworld has always been an intriguing and fascinating sphere for many authors and filmmakers alike. Vishal Bharadwaj himself says that crime is juicier than spirituality, guns are more attractive than roses and perhaps, his adherence to this notion is predominant in his movies too, where crime plays a major role. The Mumbai drug-trafficking business which is an integral part of the Mumbai Mafia, didn't go untreated by him. The resultant by-product was the film, 'Kaminey'. When we come to authors, we have Vikram Chandra, whose book, 'Sacred Games' has been made into a popular web-series in Netflix. Perhaps, the best crime writer to emerge into prominence is S. Hussain Zaidi, who is a veteran journalist, currently working as the resident editor of Deccan Chronicle/Asian Age, Mumbai. His bestselling book, 'Black Friday', based on the 1993 serial bomb blasts was filmed by the very talented Anurag Kashyap in the year, 2004. His intense research on the Mumbai Mafia has been monumental in the production of all his Bestsellers and various movies. In this paper we will take into consideration his book, "Mafia Queens of Mumbai", which depicts the lives of the very gutsy and lethal women mafia of Mumbai, their psychological complexities and the crisis, which pushed them beyond the limitations of human morality. Though he writes, not to pedestalize this pernicious race, yet we cannot ignore the feminist touch and sympathetic treatment to these women, which we can also term as the writer's folly. We are also going to delve deep into the psychic conditions of these women, through Freudian psychoanalysis and interpret the text.

### Introduction

It is a well known fact that Mumbai, besides being the industrial capital of our country, also is thronged with the goons, bhais, dons or simply put, the Mafia. This vicious group of

ganglords has always been a menace to the entire country, simultaneously being a multilayered puzzle, to the Intelligence Bureau, the peels of which are still under the process of extraction. This city and the underworld has been the bailiwick of S. Hussain Zaidi for many years since the inception of his career as a crime reporter. The underworld, with its macabre series of events and the different partakers of heinous crimes had created an awe in the mind of this budding journalist at that time, so much so that he delved deep into the labyrinthine alleys of this 'other' world to extricate information of the mafia. The resultant by-products were the best-sellers, "My name is Abu Salem", "Black Friday", "Mafia Queens of Mumbai", "Byculla to Bangkok" and many more. We all have this preconceived notion of associating the word, 'mafia' with men. We construe it as a male dominated world with women being sidelined. Whereas, the truth of the matter is that there are a handful of women criminals who were, to quote Zaidi, 'gutsier' and far more 'lethal' in accomplishing their goals. Where we have the most sought-after gangsters like Dawood Ibrahim, Haji Mastan, Vardharajan Mudaliar, Abu Salem, Chhota Shakeel etc, we also have Jenabai, Sapna didi, Jyoti Adiramlingham, Mahalaxmi Papamani and many more. In this paper we will study the book, 'Mafia Queens of Mumbai' in intricate details starting from the lives of the women criminals, their harrowing experiences, under the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, to the unintentional feminist perspective of the author. The author, here, takes up the role of the auteur who writes a movie and gives his readers, cinematically structured stories, intercutting between various tracks.

#### Understanding mafia queens through Freudian Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic criticism in literature, based on the theories of psychoanalysis, by the Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud have been instrumental in exploring the dark vistas of the characters' minds and interpreting the text for many years. It works on the concept of the unconscious or repressed desires which, when comes to surface, helps in the healing process of the individual psychological distress and complexities. He further develops his theory by introducing the notions of id, ego and superego, the three elements in the personality of an individual. In 'Mafia Queens of Mumbai', we come across some women characters, who can be examined under the light of this theory.

#### Gangubai Kathewali

The story of Gangubai Kathewali needs an intense study. 'Ganga', as she was brought up, was immensely attracted to the film industry, quite deviating from the traditional norm and

was driven by her id or primal urge of becoming an actress, which makes her besotted by Ramnik Laal and exploit him at the preliminary level. She often spends time with him with a relentless urge to fulfill her ambition, which could only be materialized by Ramnik, as he was known to spend a few years in Mumbai. However, her ego comes in between and refrains her from losing virginity before marriage and she gives in, marries Ramnik privately, elopes with him against familial restrictions. Unfortunately, her ways backfire when Ramnik, cunningly reciprocates by falsely marrying her and selling her off to the brothel in Kamathipura, Mumbai. Devastated by the discovery of truth, she tried to revolt, but finally had to give in. The writer brings out the turmoil in her mind, “..once the villagers of Kathiawad learnt that she stayed at Kamathipura in Mumbai, they would ostracise her family. Mortified by the likely consequences, Ganga finally decided not to return home.” The night of her nath utaarna ceremony was sexually uplifting. She gave in to a seth stoically and satisfied him to the core embracing her newly found profession. Perhaps, it can also be looked upon as her revolt against the society who abandoned her and suppressed her passion and desires. Her way of taking and giving pleasure in the sexual encounters with different men and getting paid well, can also be construed as a defense mechanism which hindered the harsh reality of Ramnik’s dismissal and denial of her as his wife and the society’s refusal to accept her. The way she convinced the don, Karim Lala against the perverted Pathan who raped her umpteen times, was a massive blow against the ghastly Ramnik of her unconscious mind. By giving in to the bestial male aggression she undoubtedly won over them.

### Sapna Didi

The story of Ashraf Khan aka Sapna Didi also calls for a psychoanalytical criticism. Ashraf, the wife of a notorious criminal, Mehmood, who used to work for Dawood Ibrahim turned into the femme fatale, Sapna Didi, with the sole ambition of assassinating Dawood, as he was the one, responsible for her husband’s death. In the inception of the story we are introduced to the fact that she was a beautiful woman, smitten by love for Mehmood in her early twenties, which propelled her to get married to him. Time flies, she learns her husband’s misdoings, yet manages to cope with all of that and the various ruffians, who used to visit their house. The massive blow comes when she experiences the horrendous encounter against her husband been led by the Mumbai police and sees her husband die in front of her eyes. We, then find a subversion of her personality when she transcends the limitations of a Muslim widow and vows vengeance against Dawood, who was the mastermind behind her husband’s murder. In this process she determines to get her goal accomplished by exploiting

Hussain Ustara, another ganglord, who happened to be the sworn enemy of Dawood and her mentor in training her to use the phallic symbol, gun. A castration takes place when he hands over the gun to Ashraf for teaching her to use it to her maximum capability thereby altering the roles; Ustara feels the womanly affection for Ashraf, whereas, she becomes dominant in leading him towards her destination. Ashraf also dreams day and night of assassinating Dawood so as to avenge the death of her husband. Perhaps her dream can also be perceived as her repressed desire to be authoritarian and dominant over her husband, which she could not be, unfortunately, when he was alive. After his death, she gets the opportunity to establish her control and use him, symbolized by the weapon (gun) against Dawood, her archenemy, who happened to be also her rival in her husband's affection. Dawood can also be looked upon as the representation of her orthodox father, who dominated her life restraining her independence to blossom. The dream becomes her libido and she is overruled by her id, thus becoming her sole identity, Sapna Didi. She also becomes the femme fatale to exploit Hussain Ustara to the core by sucking all the nourishment, thereby leaving him an invalid.

#### Monica Bedi

Monica Bedi was born to a middle-class Sikh family in Chabbewal, Punjab. Her parents moved to Norway after a few months of her birth, where she was brought up. She, then moved to London at the age of seventeen, to study English Literature, where she experienced a calling to enter Bollywood. Since her childhood, she had an affinity towards bollywood's glitz and glamour. Her desire bloomed when she visited Mumbai for a holiday, when she happened to meet the yesteryear bollywood star, Manoj Kumar, who heaped upon her a lot of praises regarding her looks, and how it aptly suited a contemporary role and she decided to pursue her career in films. It was then when she started facing the hurdles of making a mark in bollywood, very much unknown to her. However, Hindi film industry, during that time was performing under the ravenous influence of Mumbai Mafia and Abu Salem was a big name. The name bore a seal of extortion cases, heinous murders of Gulshan Kumar, Manisha Koirala's secretary, Ajit Dewani, builder Omprakash Kukreja etc. Abu Salem was a womanizer, who happened to be married already, yet was smitten by her. She was a damsel in distress, whereas he decided to be the knight in the armor, ready to save her. This recalcitrant criminal was hiding from the Mumbai police in Dubai at that time, continuing with the extortion business of Anees Ibrahim and he decided to disguise himself as Arsalan Ali and help his newly found lady love, Monica Bedi. She on the other hand was so much driven by her primal urge to be the face of bollywood that she accepted all his favors without

any question in her mind. Perhaps, we can say that her repressed desire of conquering Bollywood oozed out to the surface in the form of her love and affection for this notorious gangster even after she became aware of his reality. She absolutely obliterated her ambition from her mind only to be his lady and conquer her rival, Sameera, the lawfully wedded wife of Salem, who also can be interpreted as the single manifestation of her rivals in the Hindi film industry. Realization dawns upon her when she confronts the harsh reality of the prison and holds the holy book Bible for the first time in her hands. The bible can be construed as the representation of her father, the savior, she expects to arrive and eventually we find the same to be happening with her. Her father fights for her, and manages to safeguard and protect her from the prying eyes of the society. It is said that she completely dismisses the idea of talking about her personal life which can be a defense mechanism, not to dig the grave of her buried past.

#### Feminist reading of the text

There can be no harm in calling the text as a feministic piece of writing as all the women are portrayed as larger than life characters, with an indomitable spirit to conquer life's manacles, oddities and tragedies. Starting from Jenabai to Archana Balmukund Sharma, all of them are strong, stoic, possessing the shrewd and cunning trait to have their own ways. Jenabai was always known to live her life on her own terms, whether it was sloganeering for the Indian Independence, against her orthodox Muslim background or bootlegging for making her ends meet. She was fourteen when she was married to Mohammad Shah Darwesh and later bore him five children. In spite of being physically abused for supporting the Hindus in the Independence movement and following the Gandhian ideology, she was stern in her decision. It did not deter her from doing what she believed in. When partition took place in 1947 her husband moves to Pakistan, whereas she uprightly dismisses his proposal and decides to stay in Dongri, Mumbai, where she was brought up. She was left with five children with no one in the vicinity to provide for her. Ultimately, a decision had to be taken for survival and the option which appeared tempting was smuggling. She entered into the smuggling world being the broker of illegal trading of 'Chaaval' in Daana Bazaar, Mumbai. She was shrewd and was adept at the profession: "The police raided Jenabai's room at Chunawala building several times but never managed to get enough evidence to book her." She was still dealing in grains, but due to the marginal profits, she decided to shift to bootlegging under the guidance of the then Tamil don, Vardharajan Mudaliar. At first she was hindered by her orthodox Muslim conscience, but later she overruled it by being pragmatic. Her knack in the business and

ability to deceive the police became her 'brahmastra'. Later she also became a police informer along with continuing in the smuggling business, which reveals her hard inner core and determination to accomplish her goal in life. She also happened to bear immense influence over the gangster, Haji Mastan and Dawood Ibrahim. When he was disturbed by the notion of acquiring a property, owned by the 'Chilias', who were dangerous criminals and were refusing consistently to budge, he called his 'Aapa' (sister), Jenabai for a solution to his problem. She instantly solved the riddle by proposing the idea of conglomerating the Pathan gang and the Ibrahim brothers who were constantly at loggerheads. She was shrewd enough to have the foresightedness that they could prove to be far more menacing than the Chilias and can be exploited for the requisite occasion. The result was historic as the writer says. She reconciles them with her cunning tactics:

"Jenabai got up almost immediately and covered her head with her white dupatta as if in prayer and went into the next room. The visitors sat tensely, wondering where she had gone. Moments later, she came out with a Koran which was covered in a dark green cloth. She placed it carefully on the side table and came and sat with the guests. One of the visitors asked his boys to place the Koran on the centre table..... Jenabai encouraged Dawood and Sabir to place their hands on the holy book; once they did, others slowly followed. Putting their hands out, the men softly muttered that they would abstain from killing their brothers and live peacefully and in total harmony."

The writer's admiration of this woman cannot be ignored. He says, "It was a historic peace pact in the history of the Mumbai underworld, engineered by Mastan in his house and whose chief architect, undisputedly, was Jenabai."

Jenabai defied patriarchy throughout her living years by being the matriarch in her area, where she was respected by all.

Another woman who appeals to the readers a lot for her zeal and fervor was Gangubai Kathewali. She was the brothel madam of Kamathipura and the sole matriarch, who is still revered over there. The immense power and stoicism with which she took over the brothel in Kamathipura, has been lauded by the writer in the text. The description of her journey from Kathiawad, Gujarat to Kamathipura, Mumbai has been given a heroic splendor by Zaidi. She openly appealed to the government for decriminalizing prostitution and advocated the need for prostitution belts in the society. She was so convincing in her speech in the Azad Maidan that everybody in the crowd lauded her after she completed it. There is an anecdote about her

which, though questions the authenticity of the same, yet is passed down verbally, throughout generations. In a private meeting with the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, she gave a befitting reply to him when he asked her the reason, not to have married and led a normal life. She directly questioned him whether he could marry her or not, to which he became furious. It was then she said that 'it is very easy to preach than to practice'.

Mention must be made to the woman, Ashraf Khan aka Sapna Didi, who became the femme fatale, exploiting Hussain Ustara to achieve her sole ambition to murder Dawood Ibrahim, for avenging the death of her husband, Mehmood. She gave up her innocence and naivety and embraced the strong resolution and boldness, which life had to offer to her. The projection of her journey in the pages of Zaidi's book is sympathetic as well as attention grabbing.

The drug baroness, Mahalaxmi Papamani, along with her other two associates, Jyoti Adiramlingam and Savitri embodies feminism in all forms. These women, fighting all oddities of life and defying patriarchy by refusing to give in to poverty and their worthless husbands, took up the drug-peddling trade and mastered the art of the same. Implementing simple, yet effective strategies, they hoarded money like a CEO of a multinational company along with engaging several other unemployed men and women thereby providing them a rich source of income. The writer is in awe of the woman and writes:

"In the months that followed, the coterie of people working for her tripled, and this illiterate slum-dweller soon went on to launch a full-fledged empire with her own financial managers, peddlers and advisors, literally converting the Sion-Koliwala slum into a drug den."

Likewise there are other women, the wives of the dons for example, Padma, the wife of Rajan aide Ravi Poojary; Asha Gawli, the wife of underworld don-turned politician, Arun Gawli; Neeta Naik, wife of Ashwin Naik; Sujata Nikhalje, wife of Chhota Rajan etc who functioned as the compelling force behind their husbands' misdoings. They unshelled themselves from the very cocoon and became the shield to protect their husbands from their enemies. They were conniving, witty, shrewd, scheming ladies who treated their husbands as their brainchildren, and thereby providing them with suitable alternatives to deceive the law. If there is a 'Padma' who chose to brain feed her husband, then there is also Asha Gawli, who involved herself in politics, social activism to keep the bigger business of smuggling, bloodshed intact. There were also the bewitching beauties like Tarannum Khan and Archana Sharma who were involved in betting rackets and abduction. They are all wily and artful.

### Conclusion

“Mafia Queens of Mumbai” is engaging and gives us vivid details of a race which is deceitful, menacing, yet captures the awe of the writer and the readers alike. We are left spellbound after we complete each section and cannot refrain from pondering upon the wily ways of these women. It also invokes the readers to reflect upon their psychic condition during the time of their immense distress which perhaps compels them to take up the profession they were into. Though it is not a justification to their unlawful activities, but it renders a thought process. Writer S. Hussain Zaidi makes it very clear in the introduction itself that he was fascinated with these scheming women, performing in a man’s world with grandeur. Their mystifying approach created a whole lot of confusion in the minds of the intelligence bureau and police, thereby compelling them to solve the puzzles, yet failing most of the times. They are also to be perceived as the better half of their vicious husbands in the true sense of the term. However, the feminist perspective and psychoanalysis serves the purpose of understanding the characters and the text altogether.

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