



The Subjugation of Muslim Women as ‘other’ in Qaisra Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman*

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Abstract

*The research probes the anguish of Muslim women through the character Zarri Bano from “The Holy Woman” which represents the socially constructed norms under the name of religion to supply assured directions to women. The study scrutinizes the patriarchal norms that govern cultural and religious practices to maintain male hegemony in Pakistani society. It also depicts the role of women and their objectification in the society of Pakistan. The research examines how women’s stature is confined to the role of mother and daughter in Pakistani society, however, when they detract from the established standards, their bodies are forced into slavery and identities are disfigured by power mechanisms. Patriarchy uses a range of methods to control and vanquish women, particularly comparing honour and dignity with a woman’s body and trusting chastity as the ultimate good. The study targets to determine how Zarri Bano survives social and sexual domination by opposing the existing norms under the name of culture and religion. Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* initiates to analyze the tussle between women and the society where a woman is subjugated as ‘other’ taking into consideration the theory of gender and sex.*

Keywords: Muslim women, Suppression, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Marginalization.

Introduction

Qaisra Shahraz has treated the real status and the struggle of women in the society of Pakistan in the novel *The Holy Women*. Her novel depicts the intricate emotions, dilemmas, and constant struggle of women in dealing with oppression in the form of marginalization, sexual exploitation and patriarchal subjugation. *The Holy Women* represents the struggle of women in Pakistan through the prominent female character, Zarri Bano. The novel brings forth the theme of suppression, sexuality, dominance and patriarchy. The concept of ‘*Shahzadi Ibadat*’ discusses the sexuality of women and questions the orthodox and fanatic norms that benefit men to perform the power and control their partners. The suppression of sexuality is usually analyzed within the institution of marriage but the ritual of *Shahzadi Ibadat* typified how the women are forced to adopt to be the heir of the family to safeguard the wealth in the absence of any male heir. Zarri Bano, as the representative of various Pakistani women, exemplified the plight emerging through the socio-cultural conventions of ‘*Shahzadi Ibadat*’. In Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq’s regime had imposed various restrictive



rules on women making them marginalized. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is used as the lens to study the suppressed sexuality of women and the socio-cultural practice of 'shahzadi ibadat' in Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman*.

Research Objectives

- To converse the themes such as subjugation, sexuality, patriarchy and gender disparity.
- To scrutinize the sexuality of women and social and orthodox conventions that stereotypes the stature of women as the 'other'.
- To study the oppression of women and the powerful status of men glorified by the dominant cultural practices and social value system that designed the certain framework for the proceeding of women in society.
- To scrutinize the men-women relationship in the society of Pakistan through the binary opposition of self and other, master and slave, superior and inferior.

Women as 'Other'

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir posits, "What is a woman?" and answers woman is mere 'a womb'. De Beauvoir argues that there is no such thing as a 'woman's essence. No inherent or universal trait characterizes 'woman'. Her identity is formed through social interactions. Men, a culture that sustains ideological frameworks prescribing her subjection, and women's participation in those systems have all contributed to the construction of 'woman.' This condition restricts a woman's freedom and shapes her plans. Beauvoir discusses the antagonistic binarism of—man-woman, which is merely a linguistic convenience. The male-female relationship allows for distinct differences in terms of personality but it is the woman's individuality that is denied. Men are individuals as subjects, while women's differences from men are biological facts, beginning with anatomy and the foundation of a collective identity. Beauvoir argues that 'Woman' is a sexual object, a reproductive body whereas a man as a subject can be anything he wants to be, anything within his ambition and imagination. Women always had a subordinate place in respect to men throughout history and cultures, being relegated to the position of 'other' that is adjectival to man's significant subjectivity and existential activity. Whereas man has been able to transcend and dominate his surroundings, always expanding the area of his physical and intellectual achievements, a woman has remained imprisoned within 'immanence' as a prisoner to the circle of maternal and reproductive functions. Concerning to this idea of subordination, at the religious, economic and social levels, represented by historical interests of men, she remarked:

She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the absolute, she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (De Beauvoir 26)

According to Beauvoir women become the 'other' because men are escaping what is natural. Man professes himself the 'one' or 'self' whilst woman identifies herself as the 'other'. The 'one' is the yardstick, the criterion. Any divergence from the usual distinguishes others. It's crucial to remember that the 'self' simply cannot exist without the 'other'. The other, on the other hand, is granted its existence by the self: it is specified.



The Holy Woman provides instances of how women in Pakistan have been restrained and constrained by patriarchal norms and cultures for centuries by oppressive traditions under the name of religion, heritage, and the pragmatism of state authority. The social status of both men and women in Pakistan has succumbed to patriarchal dogmas as tradition, ideology, and culture generate a set of beliefs that influence masculine and feminine identity formations of 'self' and 'other'. A Pakistani English writer, Qaisra Shahraz, draws attention to Pakistan's feudal-cum-patriarchal society, in which an educated woman is forced to live conservative life of sacrifice. The traditional conceptual framework of 'izzat' is used to mute Asian femininity. This group is forbidden from speaking out against the patriarchal circle in their families. Shahraz tackles feminist issues, debating these topics as well as the dominant structure of hegemony which suppresses the identity of women.

The Holy Woman takes place in rural Sindh, one of Pakistan's four provinces. The main storyline revolves around Zarri, a modern educated lady from the new era, after the death of her only brother. Zarri Bano, an educated female character is forced to undergo the ritual of marrying to the Holy Quran. Shahraz examines the silence of Zarri and how after knowing her rights, she is forced to quit her sense of individuality. Haq Bakshish or Shahzadi Ibadat is common practice in rural Sindh Pakistan, when a family does not have a male heir to their estate, the elder daughter is proclaimed a legal heiress in a pretend marriage ceremony, and the girl is wedded to Quran. Haq bakhshwana (Marriage to the Quran) is a practice that entails the formation of a patriarchal order that is rationalized through the use of religious sentiments so that it is not called into question. (Fatima 7) According to Hadia Khan, Shahraz alludes to this religious exploitation by claiming that the patriarchal structure legitimizes the ritual of 'shahzadi Ibadat' that constantly oppressed women by misinterpreting key religious ideals. The ruling system, she claims, has modified religious ideals to fit its own goal. (Khan 6) Zari Bano's marriage to the Quran is a concept that has no place in Islam. (Ishaque 5) Hence, the traditions and culture are misinterpreted in such a way that can hinder a women's growth making her passive to be dominated easily in public and private realms. The existence of patriarchal power and its influence on the lives of 'others' is the subject of gender and sex critical discourse. The patriarchal culture supports the male dominance in every sphere of society keeping the women at subordinate positions and providing the power to men to regulate women's bodies. The issue of hegemonic masculinity is also explored in Shahraz's narrative, as it is reflected in many characters.

Hegemonic masculinity has complete control not only over how power is exercised but also over the institutions that propagate power. The practice of Haq-Bakshish is one such instance of power politics formed by patriarchal structures and using religious sentiments to legitimize its operation. The only option for the feudal father to keep his property and name is to revive an old practice of turning his beloved daughter into a Shahzadi Ibadat (a rural custom in which a lady is compelled to marry the Qur'an) and she has to remain unwed and childless throughout her life. *The Holy Woman* depicts a dichotomy between the self as 'oppressor' and the other as 'oppressed'. Zarri's character represents the 'oppressed' as she succumbed to her father's wish to become 'holy woman' by practising shehzadi ibadat to



save few acres of land after her brothers sudden death. And she suppressed her identity of a liberal feminists and turned 'holy' and accepted another identity which was socially constructed by feudal powers. She falls prey to the inhumane practices and patriarchal culture which benefits men. For Habib Khan, her father, the only way to save their land is by turning his daughter 'holy' in a ritual where she marries Holy Quran. Habib Khan depicts the 'oppressor', who forced Zarri only to preserve his lands and remain unwed and childless for all her life. Thus, Zarri Bano becomes the victim of oppression by oppressive hegemonic masculinity and sheer patriarchal culture. This makes women 'other' secluded by men because they are unable to express their feelings and desires. The novel questions the state of women in a society where she is asked to become 'holy' surrendering herself completely to religion. Can a woman become 'holy' by submitting herself to socio-religious practices? The novel is the representation of gender stereotypical notions toward women and their chastity. The feudal power controls the sexuality of women and declares them chaste and virtuous. Even though, she resists these tyrannical imposition on her. One is persuaded to evaluate the word in terms 'holy' of its binary opposition 'unholy'. The former is defined and qualified by the latter.

As a result of Habib's emphasis on her daughter's desire for marriage or man, Zarri is acutely aware of becoming 'unholy' in her father's eyes. Indeed, it is her fear of the 'unholy' that leads her to choose the life of a 'holy' woman. Zari becomes victim to the fear of being labelled as 'unholy' in the minds of her father. After the loss of Habib's elder son, Zarri Bano is cast in the role of a holy woman, as mapped out by her father. This performativity irritates her a lot. She frequently informs her father that she does not want to be a holy woman since she is unfit for the position. She explains:

There is no way I will become a holy woman... I know what it entails, and I am not cut out for that role. As you know, I have hardly ever covered my head properly. I know very little about religion. I am very much a worldly woman. I cannot become a nun" (Shahraz 79)

She adopts the position of the holy lady to prove to her father that she is an independent self after his blackmailing attack on her sexuality and that she wanted a man in her life. (Bukhari et al. 8) Because the Pakistani feudal families' policy is to withhold the inheritance through their male successors, Habib Khan consults with his father Siraj Din, before making his decision. In the absence of a male heir, the entire estate burdened the elder girl of the family to restore the property of the family (as Islam gives property rights to women). Zari Bano is now a 'shehzadi ibadat' or saintly woman. Unfortunately, all of this is accomplished in the name of tradition, which unjustly conspires with patriarchy under the guise of religion. As a result, Zari's wedding with the Quran is seen as the culturally respectable way Habib may keep his ancestral estate from slipping away from him. (Ishaque 4) Habib understands how to suppress her voice and restrict her sexuality by putting her in a humiliating predicament. Zari Bano submits herself to her father's direction owing to their ethical laws. Marital life serves as a backdrop for 'holiness' that Habib instils in his daughter. Habib blatantly imposes his sexist and chauvinist order on his daughter's body,



psyche, and character. He effectively attaches the concept of dignity to the discard and denial of his daughter's bodily side either because of his position as a father or authority as a feudal lord. By undermining her psyche, he uses the power of masculinity on her daughter's womanly self. Thus, she succumbs to her father's wish.

Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* is primarily a narrative of female sexual politics that are twisted and perpetuated against women's bodies, particularly in rural Pakistan. This is done on both a personal and a public level, as seen in Shahraz's novel, where the men in Zari Bano's family are all trying to control her sexuality both before and after her marriage to the Quran. After her marriage to Quran, Zarri becomes 'holy' and highly conscious about her sexuality to remain pure. In her journey to become 'holy woman', Zarri goes through two phases, initially, she was obligated to follow what was imposed on her by her father, though she was forced to control her desires. Later, when she becomes a scholar of Islam, she restrains herself from conjugal bliss. Habib Khan also repents for his decision of making Zarri succumb to his wishes, so now later he wishes to make amends and asks Zarri to restart her life and to get married even. She restricted herself from worldly happiness as she had pledged not to get married after becoming 'holy woman'. But, due to the untimely death of her sister Ruby (wife of Sikander), she has been requested by her mother to marry Sikander because of her nephew, Haris. And Zarri being the victim of circumstances does the same and marries Sikander. Even after getting married to Sikander, Zarri's vigorous control over herself remained the same and she only shows reluctance in having a normal marital relationship with her husband as she is scared of losing her 'pure status'. She prays to Allah:

Allah Pak, please heed the prayers of a weak woman, a sinner. Guide me back Onto Your path of peace and religious devotion. Tear out this ugly human emotion that is renting me apart and torturing my soul. Douse this longing, that fire that is engulfing my body. I am supposed to be a pure woman. How can I be that while I harbour such base feelings? Enfold me in Your holy mantle of female modesty. Rid my mind and heart of this man Who haunts me at this moment. Show me Your path; for that is the path I seek." (Shahraz 186)

This also reflects that the psyche of a woman has been manipulated in such a way that she voluntarily chooses to devoid herself of the happiness and conjugal bliss that she always wanted. Formerly, she makes a choice to resist the oppression of the patriarch, however, in her later life she chooses silence and learns to control her sexuality, due to instilled fear of ethical laws and ideals.

Conclusion

The Holy Woman by Qaisra Shahraz illustrates the plight of the 'other'. The patriarchal system has victimized the women, resulting in their suffering. The novel focuses on how the power structure utilizes practices to construct and perpetuate a preferred identity of women to control their sexuality. The concept of 'honour' is attached to a women's identity and how she is enforced to keep it intact, devoid of all her happiness. The novel underlines that the socio-religious practices are harnessed and sustained to promote the patriarchal agenda, instead religion endorses them. Zarri, not only exhibited her father's



domination, but also hostility as a girl and struggles in the authoritarian labyrinth woven by feudal social conventions camouflaged as religion. Through the feminist analysis of the text, it is evident that women in Pakistan live under the subjection to a patriarchal system, they are the extraneous, the inconsequential, and the other, whereas the subjects are the 'absolute' and 'self'. Gender is interwoven in all institutions in these societies, as the books reveal and hence the places for women and men are well defined.

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