

## THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN THE HOLY WOMAN AND SLUM CHILD

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the aspect of pejorative condition of Pakistani women through the comparative study of two novels *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz and *Slum Child* (2010) written by Bina Shah. Both the novels scrutinize communal and gendered subalternity of women and their struggle for selfhood in male chauvinist society of Pakistan. This research specifically explores the issues of women such as how they are dispossessed of identity, right of choice and social standing in the disguised form of honor. The plight of female characters in *The Holy Woman* and *Slum Child* is analyzed relatively through the basic concepts of radical feminist concepts of John Stuart Mill to reconnoiter the subservience of female sex in Pakistan. It evaluates different religious and cultural practices that assign women a distinct status in society. This research is highly significant in determining the ways to empower the Pakistani women and it also paves the ways for the future researchers to uncover the works of Pakistani female writers particularly of those who raise the voice for women in their writings.*

**Keywords:** Pejorative condition, subalternity, feminism, empowerment, and exploitation.

### INTRODUCTION

Fiction is embedded in a society in which it flourishes ceaselessly. It does not overlook the imperfections in a society rather it depicts them realistically. Pakistani fiction also highlights the culture and ongoing conflicts in Pakistani society thoroughly especially through the fiction of feminist writers that indicate the politics of gender roles and the resultant insurrection of females for their true identity in the society. Through the illustrative image of women in their works, they have highlighted the imperceptible position of women as suppressed beings and their internal hatred as well towards their mistreatment. Haleem (2014) says, "In literature, gender stereotypes are more prevalent. Myths about male and female are constructed through the writings and these are then practiced repeatedly and continuously" (p. 57).

In the course of women's portrayal in different aspects in literature, the writers have indicated and articulated the constructed psychology of Pakistani women. In Pakistan, the structure of society is based on complex rules that cause the subjugation of women on all levels. A number of factors as religious, linguistic and cultural features define the status of women as a part of society. Mumtaz and Shaheed have identified the diverse positions of women in Pakistani society in which they are oppressed. They argue,

*Depending upon her geographical location, a Pakistani woman can find herself in a tribal, urban and rural environment. She can be a highly qualified and self-confident professional or a self-effacing peasant toiling alongside her men folk; she can lead a highly cloistered life...or she can be a central figure of authority in the limited*

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*circles of influential women. The Pakistani woman then is a myriad creature for whom a single image does not suffice. To talk of Pakistani women is in fact to talk of groups of women, of clusters of similarity in a disparate reality (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 21).*

Pakistani women are dispossessed of independence, individuality and right of decision. Legislative issues of sexual orientation keep women always stuck in an unfortunate situation for being inferior sex. Their disconnection and imprisonment inside four walls of the house deprive them of their actual individuality. Identity of a woman in society becomes constitutional configuration of women's consciousness, their favored roles and capacities. Gardinar (1981) while talking about female identity mentions Heilbrun's view who asserts that "In society, victorious women are 'male-identified' but that it is a failure for a woman to take her identity from her man. Women never form a self because they need never undergo an identity crisis, yet they have an identity to lose: the price of wifehood is abandonment of self" (p. 347).

Identity construction engages a set of fundamentally interactive practices that are synchronized and can be refurbished. In fact 'identity' requires individuals, creatures, and things to be perceived in some structure made by the vernacular and it defines roles and status of that entity (Ali & Khan, 2012, p. 3). Sex becomes gender in a society that shows the phenomenon of construction of one's identity. In the point of view of Butler, the construction of women's identity is actually the "materiality of the body" (1999, p. 25) where female sex becomes gender. Salam discusses the inflexible thinking of men about females and articulates that a woman is less qualified than a man for moral behavior who knows nothing of fidelity. They are misbegotten and have a faulty and defective nature. One must be on guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and the horned devil. Her feelings drive men towards evil, just as reason impels men towards all good (2011, p. 19).

Qaisra Shahraz and Bina Shah are among those writers who have highlighted the deteriorated condition and untiring struggle of Pakistani women by making their female characters go through a difficult set of circumstances to train them in the art of life. Shahraz is settled in Manchester but her novels move around the stories of eastern values and cross-cultural issues, generation gap and question of identity. "As a fiction writer she has always promoted eastern values and culture through her writings" (Zaidi, 2013, p. 2). In her novel *The Holy woman* she vehemently uncovers the weight of the patriarchal order in an ideologically-biased Pakistani context and unveils the misuse of even religion in depriving women of their human and sexual rights. Shahraz, while dealing with the issues of modern society of Pakistan and women's issues, has given insight into the customs, beliefs and rituals of the Muslims. The themes in her novels are well interwoven as *The Holy Woman* and the *Typhoon* are compelling and highly enthralling because of their themes. She has tossed light on the matters of marriage, separation, life, death, blame and respect. She has depicted complex human feelings and their part in an individual's life. Her characters become living beings with whom the reader empathizes and sometimes doubts about their fate (Shervani, 2014, p. 3).

Bina Shah has also discussed stereotyped identity of women due to that they are the most neglected part of society. In *Slum Child*, the writer has discussed the female sexual harassment and subversive identity of women in Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In the novel, she has articulated that how the women having conservative social set up try to cope with their family and how they are physically, mentally and psychologically weakened when Pakistani men try to rule over them. Both novels advocate the notion that women are victimized and traditionally constructed bodies within multiple layers of patriarchal structures of power, represented by the men folk of their family, community, leaders and finally the state. The present research is in fact conducted in the context of subversive identity of women in Pakistan. Historically, the issue of identity of women in Pakistan has been trying to grapple with the issues of religious identities. The 1977 military dictatorship took over and the ensuing decade of General Zia-ul-Haq's rule made women direct centre of a misogynist state under his suggested Islamization project (Zia, 2009, p. 29).

This research attempts to look into the conventional thoughts that provide base for the stereotypical representation of women's identity in literary works. It specifically explores the agony and deteriorated condition of Pakistani women and their inner aversion towards maltreatment as illustrated in these novels. In both the novels, the writers advocate feminist concerns for the rights of women. The ideological dimensions behind the stereotypical representation of the identity of women are brought to the surface. It also throws light on hidden politics behind the both selected feminist texts

to realize the women about their own self. One of the primary goals of this research is to determine the ways for the empowerment of women. The hostile as well sympathetic treatment of Shahraz and Shah in observing the Pakistani women is reflected through an in-depth analysis of these texts.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Broadly speaking, literature review seeks to survey the history of the research works regarding the framework and the literary works under discussion. Literature is one of the primary sites of representation. In Pakistani English writings, different shades of women's life are presented that manifest the existing social structure of Pakistan. Robin (2000) says that "Representations repeatedly replicate the status of women as other, representation becomes reality, confused with absolute truth" (p. 3). In literary texts, the identity of women has always been presented as constructed through certain stereotypes which control their individuality and make those stereotypes the true identity of women in a society. A stereotype is a rearranged and likely overstated representation of the most widely recognized and typical qualities connected with a classification of genders. These stereotypes in a society are biased because in patriarchal society male members construct them for their direct and indirect benefits. They have both negative and positive connotations. Stereotypes on the part of women are having negative interpretations as they are presented as immoral, dangerous, seductress and eternally dissatisfied whereas male characters are role models and honest who are free in their choices. Alam (2021) articulates that "Gender stereotyping is a very common and inherently practiced, yet discursive, social, cultural as well as psychological phenomenon" (p. 11). The most important feature in portraying the identity of women incessantly in misogynist light is traditional exclusion of women in the fabrication of different types of knowledge. Their constrictive gender roles and stereotypes are further mediated by multiple elements that keep women away from social, religious and political sovereignty. The fusion of politics and religion and its impact on women's identity is often examined in literary texts. The distresses and the disparity against women have found a fundamental spot in the pages of Pakistani Urdu and English fiction and this has been supporting in adding to a Pakistani women's activist fiction. In fiction, women are depicted under the traditional oppressing roles of social, religious and economic parameter. They are shown as 'others' within and outside the house which dates back to the past tradition of colonization (Zia, 2009, p. 92).

In fact, historically Pakistani women have been stereotyped as third world women in literary texts and real world also. In colonial and postcolonial literature, they are termed as third world beings and the prefix of third world deprives them of all kinds of rights because they are treated and thought out on the margin of society. In western literary arena they have been depicted as exploited, weak, having no individuality, down-trodden and indigenious beings. Pakistani English Literature has pros and cons of colonial literature concerning representation of women. Women are represented with the patriarchal point of view both in colonial and postcolonial English fiction. Male supremacy is consolidated through the binary of good women and bad women. While analyzing the representation of women in literature, Yasmeen and Chawla (2019) conclude that "Pakistani literature is the continuation and extension of the literature produced under the colonial rulers" (p. 624). Pakistan's profoundly ingrained patriarchal culture has ascended to a feeling of entitlement among men towards women. Pakistani Women have always been sidelined and kept in repressed conditions. From ages, men's evil conduct towards female sex and their treatment towards them have made their identity obscure. Their identity is linked with their males as they are daughters, sisters or wives. Siraj (2012) in his research on the veiled identity of women says that, "The female body is central to the definition and construction" (p. 3). Due to having female sexuality they are caught up between feudal, tribal, political and religious boundaries that keep under control their complicated existence. They are differentiated, tortured and subjected to violence. Their rights don't fall in the category of human rights. They are mere puppets in the hands of male for the satisfaction of sexual desires. Jamal has criticized and questioned the conception of forbidden sexuality of women as necessary for the running of the state. In her work *Gender, Citizenship, and the Nation-State in Pakistan: Willful Daughters or Free Citizens?* (2006), she has scrutinized the two gender stereotypes comparatively; the Westernized woman and a pure Muslim girl. Westernized woman refers to an independent and self-assured woman while the other is interpreted as sexually, psychologically and emotionally suppressed Pakistani woman who has to perform the assigned roles of her society. She has argued:

*In contemporary Pakistan the women who try to achieve their true identity by breaking the traditions of their tribe, sect or religion, they are thrown out as “pure women” with an arrogant space. The edifice of ‘willful’ woman that is convalesced through the discourse of Islamization seems to intermingle with another strategy of “westernized woman” who is a right demanding individual being and that has customarily worked as a figure of speech to empower the portrayal of righteous woman (Jamal, 2006, p. 4).*

Riaz, in her dissertation *Architectures of the Veil: The Representation of the Veil and Zenanas in Pakistani Feminists Texts* (2012), discussed the connotation of veil in Pakistani context as hiding and stereotyping the identity of women in socio-political sphere on one hand and the manipulation of it by women on the other side. She has interpreted veil as the way of segregation and institutionalization of female’s identity by patriarchal society at homes and public sphere which creates a dilemma of gender for women. Her argument is centered upon the fact that in Pakistan the identity of women is concealed through the ‘zanana’ and ‘purdah’ system by patriarchy to have power over the women’s true self and their mobility. Riaz argued that “veil itself is a symbol of complex social and culturally ingrained system that cannot be rejected” (p. 3). As the print and electronic media are also the methods for projection of the socially built characters, so it should be explored particularly what pictures are being flowed. The matter is of grave worry as it influences the lives of women of all ages. It anticipates as well as decides characters for them. It forces on them goals which are anticipated by male mentality, generalizing their bodies and commodifying their personalities.

In the context of Pakistan where sex has verifiably been challenged, the pictures of women on the media too mirrors the bigger patriarchal structure of society. Subsequently, women in the media are spoken to as dependent, abused and limited to the family unit area. In spite of being an Islamic Republic state, Pakistani women are represented and generalized in the media as physically lovely and emotional. Ali and Batool (2015) criticized the oppressed and biased representation of women’s identity in media. They claim that representation of Pakistani men and women in media delineates that women are essentially in charge of kid raising, home-production and they are needy and require men's assurance while men are in charge of pay and administration. It represents and strengthens the conventional notion of womanhood within the private sphere while supports men in their roles as breadwinners performing more important duties. Moreover, while questioning the role of media in the construction of female identity as an entity having the valuable position at home, they claim; “Portrayals of women and about women are always in relation to men and often the content of the media distorts women’s status in the social world” (p. 692). Patriarchal representation of women in literary arena, electronic and print media further subordinates’ women. Patriarchy in Pakistan becomes the base of women’s subordination within and outside the home. It defines the condition of women to be one step behind men and it is considered a traditional outlook. Nasution (2018) while criticizing the condition of women says “Men superiority also appeared in some traditions applied in Pakistan. Based on the law there, women are victims in existence of tradition” (p. 4).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Theory and practice are binding to each other. There is no practice without theory and literary criticism is based on theoretical poles. Theoretical vision of theorists provides a lens or vocabulary for the interpretation of the text. Feminism provides the theoretical underpinnings for this research. The theoretical framework is based on radical feminist theory in particular. It challenges the stereotypical identity of women under male privilege. Subjects investigated in feminism incorporate segregation, stereotyping, generalization, mistreatment and patriarchy. Research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of distinction, the questioning of social supremacy, confrontation to systematic oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice. The theoretical framework of this research is based on radical feminist point of view of John Stuart Mill. The integration of this model in the framework is owing to two main specialties: first, its focus on traditional thinking of a society about women and secondly Mill’s certain significant strategies for the emancipation of women in society. Another important thing about the model is that mostly feminist models are given by female theorists but the current model is given by a male who himself participated in different activities and movements for the equal freedom of women.

Feminist views of John Stuart Mill are employed to analyze and interpret the plight of women and their struggle for their self-identity in the text of both novels. John Stuart Mill is a British philosopher, economist, moral and political theorist, administrator and radical feminist who stands against the traditional thinking of society that devalues and marginalizes women. He is considered an enthusiastic public man interested in social reform. Mill articulates his fundamental argument about feminism in his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) in its first paragraph:

*The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (p. 1)*

The significant inquiries that Stuart Mill addresses are: patriarchy is a phenomenon present in every society to oppress women. Patriarchal relationships pave the way for Capitalist forms of economic and gender exploitation, and sexual inequality is institutionalized in society through marital slavery. The interpellation of his model to the novels *The Holy Woman* and *Slum Child* analyses the ways in which the main female characters and other women are elided and ignored, their struggle for their selfhood and the hindrances which they have to face to achieve their rights. In the both novels the researcher has raised grim questions about gender injustice, women's sexuality and relationships in the conventional Muslim society deeply affected by the coercion of the modern globalized world. This research is qualitative in nature. The method in this research is primarily comparative. The texts of both the novels *The Holy Woman* and *Slum Child* are interpreted comparatively related to the portrayal of women. A close textual analysis is manipulated to explore the literal and symbolic meanings of the writers conveyed in the texts.

## **ANALYSIS**

Qaisra Shahraz is a Pakistani born English fiction and script writer who tackles the problems of social repression of women. In a review of the works of Qaisra Shahraz, Menon (2012) says that "Most of her works have women as protagonists—women victimized by society, but who fight back with an unyielding spirit" (p. 10). Through her writings, she bridges an understanding between eastern and western values. Her writings are not deeply rooted in political context but she only confers elusive clues about the fundamental political fight. Her foremost concern always remains the social conflicts at domestic levels that shape the daily experience of her female characters. In her feminist writings, Bina Shah also in the vein of many other feminist writers questions of female objectification, subordination and their socio-religious position in society. She highlights the corporal and gendered subsistence of women in Pakistani society and indirectly criticizes it. She has drawn very clearly that the women who are born and live in Pakistan under social and religious limitations can thrive only in a world which permits society of their full utilization. In her view neither Pakistan's laws nor its social system and its religious mores truly give assurance to women to have a secure place as citizens equal to men; such attitudes are conserved by patriarchal, tribal and cultural traditions, as well as the continued distortion of Islamic injunctions to suit the needs of misogynists.

Women are depicted as docile and obedient figures in Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*. The issues of women, including the feudal patriarchal exploitation of women, can undoubtedly be marked out in the chosen work of Shahraz. The novel deals with the oppressive custom of Pakistan that victimizes women in the name of compliance or obedience. Female characters in Shahraz's novel appear as sufferers in an unreasonable and unjust patriarchal society where men of their family utilize their power to achieve materialistic gains by confining them inside the houses. The world of this novel of Shahraz is predominantly patriarchal in which there is literal or metaphorical entrapment of women. The term patriarchy refers to the dominance of fathers, brothers and other male members within and outside the house. The patriarchal structure and rigid mentality of Pakistani male is criticized by Shahraz when Habib and his wife argue with each other about Sikander. Shahzada begs her husband to accept the proposal of Sikander but he is violent in response and says:

*All the more reasons for me to be cautious, I am the head of the family and I will decide what is good for my Zarri Bano. I don't like this man.... You forget, Shahzada, in our clan, destinies are made and dictated by us. I will decide if this man is to be my daughter's destiny or not. (p. 23)*

In the novel, the writer has highlighted a very significant issue of the involvement of female figures with cultural traditions in male ruling society of Pakistan. Almost all the female characters within the family configuration are ensnared and forced to comply with their patriarch who enforces female subordination. Zarri Bano, in spite of being a young educated girl, could not defend herself for her desired partner. “Her lips, however, remained sealed, bound by centuries old patriarchal customs and conventions of female silence and obedience” (p. 152). Shahraz has presented the elite class in her novel *The Holy Woman* that is dominated by male constructed customs and rules. The novel starts with a scene or description of an annual fair, Shahraz gets opportunity to unearth the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society. As in the beginning of the novel, the novelist narrates that “it was not common or socially acceptable for young women to join openly in all-male set of activities” (p. 12). In the novel, Jafar – Zarri Bano’s younger brother – expects from his sister to be at home because it is considered the worth of a young girl. He says that “It creates a very bad impression. Not only of you, but of us and our father. Only naughty women do that sort of things...it is not good for our izzat” (p. 13).

In the novel, the behavior of Zarri Bano’s father is strict concerning his clan’s traditions and customs. Her father and grandfather mould her identity as they want and their authority remains unquestioned because they are successful in their evil plans. Trauma of Zarri Bano is that she is prepared to surrender her sexuality as being cultivated in male directed culture. She has to alter her sexual passions for a man by becoming a holy woman or a Muslim nun who is considered the epitome of chastity and purity. Shahraz explains her hypnotized condition as:

*While remembering her lover’s fascinating actions the lightning of her father’s words, you desire a man in your life jolted her with condemnation. She was shaken and ashamed on this sexual taboo. She snatched her hand away as if she had burned her love and ward off her face. (p. 123)*

The representation of women’s identity in the novel explores that Shahraz has depicted a picture of Pakistani society where women are chained in the marital bond that strangles their freedom and identity. Shaw also comments on the system of marriage and oppression of women in his play *Getting Married* (1908), “Our marriage law is inhuman and unreasonable to the point of downright abomination” (preface). They are reminded again and again that they are not independent but their husbands and fathers are the true makers of their destinies. Marriage in its true sense means a relationship of mutual understanding and love but in the society of Pakistan its meaning has been distorted by the physical and psychological exploitation of wives.

In the novel, the burden of old customs and traditions and the pressure of Zarri Bano’s father places her individuality and identity at stake. Shahraz has depicted her as a woman who has to ignore her individuality for the sake of family’s honor and inheritance. Zarri Bano is stereotyped as mere subaltern whose fate is lying in the hands of others. Her identity, as an educated liberal, proves just an illusion when she becomes puppet in her house. Another important thing is that from the very beginning of the novel, the issue of Zarri Bano’s marriage is overwhelming in family. It symbolizes that she herself has no identity and individuality but for her true identity is dependent on a man. Zarri Bano has observed the suppressed life of married women even of her mother’s segregation within the house. She does not agree to marry. Shahraz’s criticism over the issues of marriage can be observed when Zarri Bano says to Sikander “marriage is as much an institution as any other aspect of life. In our patriarchal world, marriage can be a bigger sacrifice than the one that you imagine me going through with” (p. 125). In the relationship between husband and wife, Habib and Shahzada are shown as puppet and puppeteer. Shahzada is a puppet and her husband is a puppeteer who has the authority to mold her wife’s fate. Shahzada is psychologically paralyzed by her husband. Her maternal love is exploited by her husband at the time when her husband Habib wants to make Zarri Bano a Muslim nun or a “holy woman”. Mill’s claim in such type of situation proves right as he says: wife within the house becomes “the actual bondservant of her husband” (p. 55). In the novel, the behavior of Zarri Bano’s father is strict. Her father and grandfather mould her identity as they want and their authority remains unquestioned because they are successful in their evil plans. Shahzada, as a woman and mother appears helpless on the behalf of her daughter as she is threatened for divorce. The powerlessness of women is prevalent when Shahzada asks her husband that she will never let him to play with the destiny of Zarri Bano by marrying with Quran instead of her beloved Sikander. He blatantly barks at her and says, “It can and will happen! Do you think that you, a female, can prevent it? The scales are weighted against you, woman” (p. 67).

The veiling ceremony in the novel also illustrates how men deprive women from their individuality and control their self. The novel is set in Chiragpur, a village in the province of Sindh, and it highlights the patriarchal customs of that place. Shahraz claims that "Chiragpur was a small place, and a woman's izzat, her honor was the most treasured commodity of all" (p. 27). Here the village's customs of commodification of women stand for the overall usage of women as a commodity in Pakistani society. His father deals her as a commodity because he molds her fate to save forefather's land. His patriarchal oriental gaze views her as a 'commodity' and a 'raw material that in fact fuels her materialistic plans.

The story of the novel seems complex symbolically because it takes sudden turns on different sides. As at first, as a reader we feel elated at her liberal standing outside the house and when she wears a long black veil, the reader is in mourning then suddenly she again emerges as an independent woman. In the whole story, her identity takes many sides. First, she is forcefully made a holy nun and then was asked to marry Sikandar for the sake of a child. She breaks the bond of a holy woman and gets married with Sikander but again her identity is subordinate to a man. Like an educated modern girl, she ultimately gets her freedom and rescued herself from the strict bond of the holy woman. Ahmad (2009) states, "She becomes a 'holy woman' to challenge this custom and fulfils its requirements but ultimately wins in defeating the myth of the custom" (p. 95).

On the other hand, in the fabric of *Slum Child* Shah has presented a very realistic depiction of the patriarchal relationships, inhuman behavior and barbaric acts of men towards women's sexuality in Pakistani society. She also anticipates the absurd social conduct which victimizes women for any bodily aggression and puts them down to moan with their pungent experience which bestow them sensation of pain and loss. Female figures are shown as overwhelmed by the shame and disaster of their sexuality. They face barbaric attitude of men towards their sexuality that men try to exploit in a wrong way. Their identity becomes subordinate to its usage.

In the novel *Slum Child* of Shah, the female characters particularly Laila and her mother are as helpless and impotent as Zarri Bano and her mother in *The Holy Woman*. Shah has presented her female figures as the target of all kinds of sufferings in society. In the novel, first the female sexuality is shameful for Laila and her sister as their father divorces her mother because she has given birth to baby girls and not boys. Inequality on the basis of gender is observable in the novel when Irfan prefers the needs of his sons and ignores both of the daughters. When Zainab, looking for the protection and better future of her two daughters, marries once more with Irfan, she informs Laila and Jumana on inquiring about their own father that he "didn't want to father more girls. Probably didn't think I could have another boy" (p. 11).

Shah's female characters in the novel are also trapped in the boundaries set by their males. In the text of the novel the main character Laila, Jumana and her mother appear as going through the tough circumstances in which their conscious and unconscious struggle demonstrate their powerlessness in male centered world. In fact, women are recognized through their bodies not mind. In Mill's point of view, women in society are also considered as just having bodies and not minds or abilities. Shah's fictional figure Laila's distorted self and identity in the novel does not represent her own character but she is the representative of Pakistani women or girls in general who have to struggle to save themselves from the rigid and filthy attitude of men.

In the novel, the figure of Laila is continuously the dupe of utilization and mistreatment. Her figure becomes a zone where male's exploitative gaze almost rapes her. In the whole story, she seems in the struggle to save her sexuality. She is depicted as a passive and weak Pakistani girl. In the novel, her identity is defined by her body that how she grows and her physical attraction becomes the cause of male lustful gaze over her. She is a poor attractive young girl like Alice of Muhammad Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2013) in which Alice's figure becomes "a compact war Zone" (p. 174). Laila is entrapped in a difficult situation where she feels darkness for her in her surroundings. In south Asian societies especially in Pakistan, women are positioned for men's sexual satisfaction and home tasks. The different terms for a young unmarried girl as 'Spinster', 'Bachelor' and 'Virgin' are used to indicate the category and worth of a girl. Shah expresses men's insatiability and greediness for making money by exploiting women's sexuality because they know the reality that they have to submit their self before their men. Irfan and his best friend Salim's behavior does not only expose their intentions but in shah's novel they are the representatives of all men in Pakistani society. In the novel, Salim being an outsider in the family is not only acquisitive about Laila but Irfan also shows his utilitarian mind-set towards his daughter Laila. When Salim asks Irfan to sell Laila and get money for the business, he in return proves

meaner who only thinks Laila as the nurture and nurse of his sons. Irfan tells to his friend, Laila cannot be sold because “she is the only one in the house who can burn the stove. Without her no one can look after my sons” (p. 126). Shah has portrayed a very shocking state of affair of Pakistani men that they make bargaining’s for their daughters to get monetary benefits. When Salim asks Laila’s father that the girl can be proved much profitable for him, he abruptly inquires “By how much?” (p. 127).

Throughout the novel, Laila is being used as a beneficial article of trade. First she has been used to cook food for her father’s sons and then her father tries to use her as a property that can be sold for profit. Her identity is fluctuating in step father’s house. Salim says to Irfan:

*He is going to call in the brothel to the broker that they have a young, untouched, beautiful virgin. They have a client Sheikh who needs such girl as a plaything for his pleasure and enjoyment. There are other patrons waiting for such girls and if he is geared up for agreement your good luck will be proved in front of you. (p. 127)*

In broad-spectrum, Salim in the novel represents male’s attitude towards women’s sexuality which appears in danger in their hands. Sexual harassment within the house and outside is prominent in *Slum Child* for Laila. She is shown as a pawn in the game of chess. Her maturity proves irritable and distressful because she has to run alone to save herself in a wolfish society. The novel is set in Karachi and Shah has depicted the life of the women of slums but through this iconic work she has represented the whole set-up of unyielding and stifled society of Pakistan. Through the exploitation of Laila, the writer elucidates the picture of deplorable condition of Pakistani women. Laila becomes mere an object in the evil plan of her father. Shah elaborates this when Laila thinks “I was trapped in the game of chess, where he knew all the moves and all I could do was to move straight ahead” (p. 237). In the same way Zarri Bano in *The Holy Woman* considers herself entrapped and loser in the “game of male power-play” (p. 74) and “a pawn in a game of male chess” (p. 85).

In the novel, fractured relationship is highlighted between two sexes within household, merely based on sexual needs and lack of intimation that further subjugate women. Her female characters appear as tragic figures. Throughout the story, they are in continuous struggle of self-discovery. Another major subject that Bina Shah has elaborated in her novel is men’s haunting shadow for women and they live continuously in the atmosphere of apprehension, and expected to be compliant to social standards and customs. In the novel, Shah’s women confront different types of savagery, segregation and disparity in their life. In fact in south Asian societies roughness against women in numberless ways is normally not thought out as an intrusion of human rights but instead as an archetypal perspective of existence of individuals of Pakistan. Shah expresses her inner disliking also towards conservative men who in the name of husbands, brothers and fathers exploit women. Shah’s eccentric attitude towards men can be observed in the same novel when Laila is absorbed in her thinking about men. Her father tries to smash her right to live a normal life as he intends to sell her in the brothel. Her father’s conversation with his friend Salim echoes in her ears and mind and she is obsessed with the idea that all men are greedy and inhuman towards women. She thinks, once her mother also affirmed this by saying that,

*Men just create nuisance for women. They always interfere in your (women) matters either they don’t know about the nature of the work and problem. They create more troubles in your life by making it unaffordable and no matter who that man is in your life but “Get a man and get a headache”. (p. 160)*

At the house of a rich family, Insari people, she repeatedly feels her sense of loss and self-esteem. At every stage, she feels as her individuality is strangled by invisible hands. She thinks that she is the slave of that rich family where her pride becomes an insignificant thing (pp. 205-1). Motherhood and marriage becomes further bullets for the subjectivity and loss of individuality of women as in the novel the mother of Laila is exploited for being the mother of daughters. Silva (2003) notes “men are conferred with society’s esteem, and the womb is valorized when it produces sons” (p. 39).

Submissive domesticity is prevalent in the novel as Laila’s mother herself works at the house of a wealthy family to feed her daughters and does not complain even Irfan is so called supporter and he spends lavishly on his smoking and drinking only. She follows the traditional codes of femininity that renders women just slaves at home as Femininity identifies women as acquiescent and loyal to domestic welfare. Marriage becomes a source of continuous hardships for the mother of Laila which

ultimately becomes the death of her soul. Marriage and motherhood status further creates a guilt complex on the basis of internal feelings.

Female figures, in both the under-discussion novels, struggle for their true existence and identity. "The notion of identity has been indispensable in contemporary intellectual discourse (Kamran, 2021, p.132). In both the novels, the female figures undergo hard circumstances of their subjugation and maltreatment in the hands of men. They are utilized as mere puppets because their men try to reshape their identity and fates for the sake of their personal benefits. They are dehumanized by the old customs and traditions of a patriarchal society. The examination of the female characters in both the novels has unveiled the real image of Pakistani women who are defined in the boundary of tribal, feudal and clan system and their male members whom they belong become their identity in society. The female protagonists of both the novels are victimized inside the house owing to the hypocritical behavior of their fathers.

## CONCLUSION

This research has endeavored to sketch the deteriorated and stagnant image of Pakistani women as presented by the Pakistani female writers in their fiction. The fictional narratives take the responsibility of presenting the reality of life of women as it is. Through the traumatic experiences, the factual tale of physical and psychological sufferings of women is uncovered. The hostile as well sympathetic treatment of Shahraz and Shah in observing the Pakistani women is reflected through an in-depth analysis of these texts. The analysis of the female characters in both the novels has unveiled the real image of Pakistani women who are defined in the boundary of tribal, feudal and clan system and their male members whom they belong, become their identity in society. The interpretation of various fictional female characters of Shah and Shahraz in this article traces the quietness of sufferers and their extraordinary mental grievance. The female characters in the selected works of Bina Shah and Qaisra Shahraz are depicted as oppressed beings at domestic level. Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* and Shah's *Slum Child* explore some of the social issues such as marriage, sexual commodification and victimization of women in Pakistani society. They try to cope with the parental, social and cultural pressures in their lives for the sake of family's honor and often they are forced to do that. On one side, this research has analyzed the censored state of women and on the other side the underlying thinking of the writers in writing these works. Female figures in the selected works are analyzed as developing ones who are first entangled in the web of men's world where customs give protection to men's brutality but afterwards, they come forward as self-assured figures. The patriarchal scales are analyzed as weighed against the sexuality and liberty of women. The ideological dimensions behind the stereotypical representation of the identity female characters are brought to the surface. The real, ritualistic and socio-political method of control over women has been condemned in both works through fictional characters. The analysis of various women figures across the selected novels condemns the fascination and male obsession with female body and sexuality. The research is concluded by analyzing that multiple disturbing element in the life of Pakistani women keep them in constant state of tension and subjugation as through the system of marriage they are further pushed into slavery. They are exploited as being wife and daughter within the house and being a woman her figure is exploited outside the house also. It further analyzes different ways for the empowerment of women to create a balanced society. In the light of Mill's theory, the researchers have put forward some benefits which are the outcome of inevitable change. The researchers have suggested that women should be given equal rights in Pakistani society to make it a developed country because if the women are secluded from the mainstream of society, the abilities of half of human race will be wasted as their talent cannot be utilized for the development of the society.

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