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Aroosa Kanwal

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## **Apology or No Apology: Indigenous Models of Subjection and Emancipation in Pakistani Women's Fiction**

By Aroosa Kanwal<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This survey paper focuses on Pakistani Anglophone literary narratives that examine the multiple identities of victimized women as opposed to the commonly endorsed essentialist and reductive argument that is too easily conscripted into post-9/11 global discourses surrounding women of colour. In the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship, my purpose in this paper is to foreground the simultaneous liberation and subjection, centrality and marginality, of Pakistani women. I argue that it is important to situate third world women's subjection as well as agency in relation to the class, regional, ethnic and religious diversities that inform the degree and nature of freedom and constraints that women experience. In addition to this, urban, rural, tribal and feudal environments also inform the plurality of victimized identities as well as of women's agency. Against this backdrop, I read Pakistani literary narratives as acts of breaking through the Eurocentric monopolization of a reductive one-dimensional image of the Muslim world by emphasizing the need to situate the subjectivities of Pakistani women within community-based relationships and responsibilities, both of which have intrinsic value in Muslim culture. In so doing, I emphasize the importance of incorporating in these dominant discourses an exclusively Pakistani-Muslim feminist perspective that considers and claims pluralistic alternatives.

*Keywords:* Pakistani fiction, agency, subjection, community-based relationships, third world women

### **Introduction**

This survey paper focuses on Pakistani Anglophone literary narratives that figure out the multiple identities of victimized women as opposed to the commonly endorsed essentialist and reductive argument that is too easily conscripted into post-9/11 global discourses surrounding women of colour. In the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship, my purpose in this paper is to foreground the simultaneous liberation and subjection, centrality and marginality, of Pakistani women. I argue that it is important to situate third world women's subjection as well as agency in relation to the class, ethnic and religious diversities as well as urban, tribal and feudal

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<sup>1</sup> Aroosa Kanwal is Assistant Professor in English Literature at International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. She received her PhD from Lancaster University, UK. She is an author of *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015). Her book was awarded the KLF-Coca-Cola award for the best non-fiction book of the year 2015 written by the writer of Pakistani origin. She teaches modern drama, Pakistani Literature in English, Postcolonial literature, contemporary short fiction and literary criticism and theory. Her current research interests include post-9/11 constructions of Muslims and Islam in relation to Islamophobic discourse, politics of representation, and questions of migration, borders, identity and resistance in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction. Her chapters on these connections can be found in Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert, Eds., *Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora* (Routledge, 2014) and Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, ed., *Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012)

environments that inform the plurality of victimized identities and the nature and degree of freedom that women experience within patriarchal societies. Against this backdrop, I read Pakistani literary narratives as acts of breaking through the Eurocentric monopolization of a reductive one-dimensional image of the Muslim world by emphasizing the need to situate more precisely the subjectivities of Pakistani women within community-based relationships and responsibilities, both of which have intrinsic value in sub-continent Muslim culture. In so doing, I emphasize the importance of incorporating in these west-led dominant discourses an exclusively Pakistani-Muslim feministic perspective that considers and claims pluralistic alternatives. This approach foregrounds the complexity embedded in the position and social status of Pakistani women, who rebelliously or humbly negotiate their female spaces that serve as a site for political, social and cultural contestation.

While many people within and outside Pakistan envision the Nobel Peace Prize-awardee Malala Yousafzai to be an icon of women's empowerment in the third world, many others view this child-education activist with great cynicism, labelling her a Western imperial agent. I do not intend to delve here into either of these positions, I am more interested in exploring the reasons behind an important question: why there has been such a backlash within and outside Pakistan against a Pakistani Muslim girl's plea for the right to education? There is no denying that women in many patriarchal societies, including Pakistan, are suppressed and denied basic rights, but as Bina Shah, a novelist and journalist living in Karachi, says: "If she [Malala] gets the Nobel Prize for getting shot, for seeking education, it doesn't put Pakistan in the best of light . . . From my experience that's not the everyday story of Pakistani children going to school" (Pilling n.p). Shah's response to the cynicism which Malala experiences does, in fact, gesture towards an anxiety felt by many (Pakistani) Muslims over cherry-picked cases from third world societies which partly inform Western public discourses that tend to homogenise all third world women, thereby perpetuating neo-Orientalist tropes of Muslim women and the gender-based binary that is evident in conservative Muslim societies. It is for precisely that reason that many Pakistani Anglophone writers have focused on issues that not only seek to critique the gender inequality within Pakistan's patriarchal society, but at the same time to deconstruct the reductive trope of oppressed *burqa*-clad Muslim women. My purpose in this paper is to highlight the complexity (which neither Malala's speeches/ talks nor mainstream Western discourses foreground) embedded in the social positions of Pakistani women coming from different classes, castes and backgrounds which, I suggest, obfuscate rather than reveal the kind of oppression they face. While arguing that there is no universal structure of patriarchal domination within third world societies, I suggest that the restrictions imposed on Muslim women also do not need to be homogenized. Since Pakistan is ethnically and religiously a heterogeneous state, it is significant to situate the discourses surrounding women's suppression in relation to the class, regional, ethnic and religious diversities that inform the degree and nature of the constraints that women experience. Similarly, urban, rural, tribal and feudal environments also inform the plurality of victimized identities. In addition, I will also consider third world women's subjectivities in the "context of global hegemony of Western scholarship" (Mohanty and Russo 55), which in fact highlights the need to incorporate in these dominant discourses an exclusively Pakistani-Muslim feministic perspective that considers and claims pluralistic alternatives.

No wonder then that Pakistani Anglophone writing features diverse female characters ranging from traditional, passive and suppressed to liberal, assertive and agentive. Most significantly, the diversity among such writers depends on the national and international political contexts that inform the representations of female characters in their work. For example, feudal

structures, Zia's major policy initiatives including the enforcement of Hudood and veiling (predominantly in the Pakistani media), the Talibanization of the North-west province of Pakistan, the US war against terrorism, the discriminatory policies against religious minorities and the secular-religious divide within the country since the late '70s have contributed to the ways in which Pakistani (Muslim) women have been perceived in the West. It is against the backdrop of this context that much Pakistani writing in English can be seen as an act of breaking through the Eurocentric monopolization of this one-dimensional image of the Muslim world. These fictional narratives confront the homogenization of third world women's discourses by flagging up the simultaneous liberation and subjection of Pakistani women. Nevertheless, these writers are equally critical of the intolerant social practices and state violence espoused in the name of Islam and the monolithic definitions of Islam. Therefore, in this survey paper, I suggest that Pakistani writing foregrounds the need to reconceptualize the Western assumptions about Pakistani women that are predominantly constructed with orientalist strokes. This re-inscription of ideas about (Pakistani) Muslim womanhood is not possible without considering the glocal pair and the resistance of those disadvantaged by global forces. This also registers the shift to a post-9/11 social imaginary that has reframed misogynist tendencies, such as honour killings, forced marriages, forced veiling and other tribal customs, as general practices in Muslim culture. Crucially, such patriarchal tendencies have continued to inform the US slogan 'save the women' in the aftermath of 9/11, and the US has indubitably manipulated such issues to enforce the war against Afghanistan and to justify drone attacks against al-Qaeda terrorists in Pakistan since 2004. This attitude calls for a more inclusive and heterogeneous view of Muslim culture, not only in terms of progressive elements<sup>2</sup> within Islamic societies but also in terms of the multiple kinds of oppression that Muslim women experience. In light of the foregoing it can be observed Uzma Aslam Khan, Qaisra Shahraz, Maha Phillips Khan and Kamila Shamsie not only picture Pakistan as a land of opportunities, predominantly for more privileged educated women from liberal elite classes who, "having control over their own bodies and sexualities" (Mohanty and Russo 56), are willing to stand up for their rights but have also significantly attempted to depict the working-class, less privileged and, albeit agentive, women in Pakistani urban and rural patriarchal cultures. Particularly useful in this context are fictional narratives that figure out the multiple identities of victimized women as opposed to the commonly endorsed essentialist and reductive argument, too easily conscripted into global discourses surrounding women of colour.

No account of Pakistani English-language literary production is complete without a discussion of General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime, which has often been viewed by many second-generation writers of Pakistani origin as the most oppressive era with regard to anti-women policies, in particular the Hudood Ordinance. This has raised a plethora of questions pertaining to women's rights in Pakistan due to loopholes within the provisions of the ordinance.<sup>3</sup> It would not be wrong to say that no era in Pakistan's history has featured so frequently in literary works as Zia's military dictatorship. Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, Rukhsana Ahmed's *We Sinful Women*, Surayya Khan's *City of Spies*, Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, Muhammad Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Ali Sethi's *The Wish Maker* and Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*

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<sup>2</sup> There is no denying the fact that women in third world countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh have enjoyed the distinction of being the first Prime Ministers of their states, despite resistance from the clergy and/or the military. In addition to this, Islamic rights to vote and inherit reveal not only justice but also a lot of protection and compassion for women that are conveniently ignored in favour of the injustices done to women by patriarchal structures.

<sup>3</sup> For details, see Shah 2006, 129.

are a few examples of fictional narratives that engage with the institutionalization of Zia's Islamization agenda, coupled with domestic pressures and US realpolitik. It is interesting to note that in terms of a very bold critique of Zia's gender-biased policies and political exploitation of the female body and sexuality, the most powerful resistance has actually come from Pakistani-Muslim feminist Urdu poets (most importantly, Kishwar Naheed, Fehmida Riaz, Zehra Nigah, Sara Shagufta, Saeeda Gazda, Ishrat Afreen and Neelma Sarwar), whose poetry has been also translated and edited by Rukhsana Ahmad in the form of an anthology: *We Sinful Women*. Their poetry probes and challenges the military-led political and social authoritarianism that has had obvious implications for (comparatively more liberal) Pakistani women in terms of their individual and political freedom. These feminist poets have been radically vocal in their protests against the orthodox ways in which Islam is interpreted and imposed, as Naheed says, assertively:

When one is prohibited from living life according to one's heart, then why bow your head and walk away? Why not make that place of slaughter the field of battle? Wage war until the last breath. So, I too could not bow down my neck. My poems are such a battle as if, by reading them in a loud voice, I survived my own slaughter . . . If by reading them people are aroused or startled then what's the harm in that? (cited in Ananthram 217)

It was in fact Naheed's poem "We Sinful Women", written to criticise the infamous Hudood Ordinance in Pakistan and assert a rebellious feminine identity, which lent its name to the anthology edited by Ahmad. The poems included in the anthology challenge issues of censorship, imposed veiling, patriarchal interpretations of religion and honour and cultural hierarchies. For example, challenging and criticizing the notions of Chadur and Chardeewari and the "political and religious codifications of veiling", (Silva 210) Nigah, a poet and a scriptwriter, corroborates:

Warm and tendersoft, thus *chadur*  
Of compromise has taken me years to knit.  
. . .  
Stretched above us, this will become our home,  
Spread beneath us, it will bloom into a garden,  
Raise it, and it will become our curtain. (113)

Envisioning "this black chadur" as a prison, Riaz too refuses to be considered a "disease that needs to be drowned in secret darkness" (91). Demanding autonomy for the female body and writing radically about women's bodies and sexuality, these agentive women poets have shown that women's narratives have never been divorced from state politics or even from the sociocultural and historical dimensions of public spaces. Pakistani fictional narratives are no exception but, nevertheless, what differentiates the fictional narratives I focus on in this paper from the fiery transgressive verse of these feminists Urdu poets is the fact that Pakistani fiction writers tend to situate the subjectivities of Pakistani women predominantly within community-based relationships and responsibilities, both of which have intrinsic value in subcontinental Muslim culture. This approach foregrounds the complexity embedded in the position and social status of Pakistani women, who rebelliously or humbly negotiate their female spaces that serve as a site for political, social and cultural contestation, as I argue in the following narratives.

Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* most famously considers the indigenous protests against the notorious Hudood Ordinance through the character of Samina, who is shown to have become the victim of a *mullah* dictator whose government aims to "sen[d] violent tremors down the spine of the women's movement . . . Zia's Islam concerned itself primarily with striking down the rights

of women and befriending fundamentalists” (138). Samina, along with her friend Shehnaz Saeed, protests against the “misogynist deployment of religion to assert control over women” (Ahmed, Morey and Yaqin 203) and therefore refuses to be “one of those women the beards approve of” (*Broken* 59). Samina’s public encounter with Maulana on the issue of head covering and her efforts to discover feminist traditions within Islam is a clear rejection of state-sponsored religious repression. In so doing, both women (Shehnaz and Samina) not only challenge the patriarchal interpretations of Shariah Law under Zia’s government, but also refuse to be swayed by the political momentum of Zia’s Pakistan. By acting out their desires and rights as autonomous women, Samina and Shahnaz rupture the Islamist and masculine constructions of women’s identity, thereby posing alternative lines of women’s autonomy within the home, community and nation. What I would specifically like to emphasize here is the fact that Shamsie’s fictional narrative indubitably provides significant insights into the social, political, cultural and legal implications of Zia’s Islamization of Pakistan for women but, nevertheless, this should not be read as predominantly a representation of the monolithic conservative construction of Pakistani society. I argue that these fictional narratives (particularly by Shamsie, Suleri and Khan) instead of simply considering Islamization to be an attack on “modern nation-state formation” do, in fact, rebut and complicate the traditional vs modernity binary, thereby allowing “a [more] nuanced account of the discursive terrain where [female] political subjectivities are constructed and contested . . . [and] in which the state is apprehended as a complex of practices, a complex that overlaps, contends, and collaborates with a catachrestic sphere of civil society that includes both religious and secular groups” (Jamal 286). I suggest that it is only through a contrapuntal reading of Pakistani fictional narratives we can understand “the limit of the state’s authority when women creatively invoke discourses of citizenship and human rights in their own interest” (Jamal 286). *Broken Verses* engages with these discourses through the characters of Samina and Shahnaz (as explained above), as does Khan’s quintessential work that also critically focuses on the institutionalisation of Nizam-e-Mustafa, which has obvious implications for women in the form of the promulgation of the Hudood or Zina Ordinance.

Khan’s *The Geometry of God* features 1970s and 1980s Pakistan, with particular emphasis on the intersections of state, gender and religion. Rejecting the idea of single, monolithic, oppressive females in an Islamized patriarchal nation-state, Khan’s modern agentic female protagonists, Amal and Mehwish are portrayed as creators of their own spaces to confront society’s oppressive double standards. Amal and Mehwish experience a far more liberated existence due to their educated background. Amal is shown to be Pakistan’s first woman paleontologist, a job that requires going “on digs”, even though it involves being alone “with many men” (304), something which is still unconventional and uncommon in traditional societies: “she should know her natural place is at home” (273). Amal’s sexual autonomy, however, is foregrounded, not only in her personal life, as she chooses to marry a man she loves, but also in her professional life after marriage, and in so doing, rebels against orthodox societal norms and the oppressive dictates of Islamization within Pakistan that are often viewed as specifically targeting Pakistani women. Even after their marriage, Amal’s husband Omar silently ignores his mother’s complaints about her going on digs alone that signposts the potential for Pakistani women to create spaces of their own choice.

Also, Amal’s younger sister, Mehwish, despite her blindness, dismisses the radical and politicized theology perpetuated by the mullah dictator through her subversive use of language. Mehwish’s weakness cum ignorance allows her to express views about sex, love, religion and censorship that would otherwise remain unsayable in Pakistan’s conservative and Islamized

society. Her innocuous yet subversive vocabulary allows her and the readers to perceive the hidden meanings of words in the context of sacred and secular world views, and hence the promiscuous becomes a “promise kiss” (182), intimacy becomes “inty messy”, melancholy becomes “me link holy”, etiquette becomes “eticut” and experiment becomes “ex pearmint” (48). Zinck rightly observes that Mehwish’s “phonic splits” reflect “a certain disregard for authority and orthodoxy”. For example, words like “Dog ma”, “sin a men”, “a her tick” and “dead literalists” provide compelling references to “the zealots of apocalyptic superstition and [the] literal reading of the Quran epitomized by Jamat-e-Pedaish”. In so doing, Mehwish becomes the “echo chamber” of her subversive elder sister, Amal. And Khan “subverts the notion of a monolithic text, of static and ossified identities” (Zinck 49, 52). Both Mehwish and Amal not only assert their sexual autonomy but also epitomize the existence of liberated social spaces within Pakistani traditional society where women cannot merely be perceived as ontologically defined by one attribute, patriarchal religion.

A similar backlash against anti-feminist and anti-women policies also came from first-generation writers, such as Sara Suleri. Suleri’s *Meatless Days*, written in the form of a memoir, provides a salient warning about the regime’s discourse of chadar and chaardewari by interweaving Pakistan’s national history with the personal story of her family. The notion of agency is most apparent in Sara’s home and family that contribute to the identity formation of the women protagonists. Suleri’s description of Pakistan as a place where “the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary” (1) highlights the social fabric of a nation-state that “challenge[s] the public invisibility of women in Pakistan through their representation within the private sphere” (79). Nevertheless, it is extremely important to note that despite women’s confinement in domesticated spaces where they are “too busy for that, just living [as] a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant”, Suleri rejects any homogenous or monolithic categorisation of women in Pakistan. And this is foregrounded through “a complex home/female body/nation nexus in the memoir that tends to link domesticated women to the construction of nations” (Kanwal 27) and consequently helps silenced women reclaim their agency. Suleri suggests that while the notion of home for men is abstract, “women know intimately that our first homes are within the bodies of women, and these are the homes which precede nations and from which nations may emerge” (211). In other words, “the nation is born from the necessarily female subject”. Men live in a nation but “only women can produce a nation” (Sutherland 212). In light of the foregoing it can be argued that women’s agency cannot be denied in terms of making the home or “ghar the inner sanctuary of the nation, with women its representation” (Sen 199). This interface between womanhood and nationhood does in fact problematize and dramatize the spaces in which woman’s body exists. As Iffat explains to Sara: “home is where your mother is, one; it is when you are mother, two; and in between it’s almost as though your spirit must retract . . . your spirit must become a tiny, concentrated little thing, so that your body feels like a spacious place in which to live” (147), a place which, against the backdrop of the nationalist discourse, can be juxtaposed with a nation. Here I find Abu-Lughod’s idea of family and community-based relationships and responsibilities useful, in that “families are paramount in the organization of communities [in South Asia] and the home is associated with the sanctity of women” (36). It is precisely in this context that Suleri believes that “these are the homes which precede nations and from which nations may emerge” (211). The memoir is exclusively oriented towards a pressing need to recognize this “civilizing role that mothers play” (Guberman 10), because “mothers [not only] feed our bodies [but also] our minds” (Sunderland 212). Therefore, by foregrounding the importance of traditionally female spaces within Muslim communities, Suleri counters the

discourse that predominantly links female emancipation and empowerment with the visibility of women in the public domain, thereby reconfiguring female subjectivities through home/female body/nation nexus. What I want to suggest here is that the dynamics that inform women's position in Pakistani society are not only dazzlingly diverse but also cultural and community specific. Therefore, in all three works discussed so far, despite the hegemonic gender norms, the female protagonists, Amal, Mehwish, Samina and Ifat, have all become "agentic individuals" (Abu-Lughod 9) in their own ways, thus debunking any assumed or preconceived relation between patriarchal Muslim culture and female autonomy.

Nevertheless, I do not intend to deny here the fact that women do suffer disturbing forms of violence in Pakistan but, in light of the foregoing discussion, it is not difficult to understand why Judith Butler has criticized "the notion of universal patriarchy . . . [and] its failure to account for the working of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists" (5). Following Butler, I argue that it is equally important to flesh out the complexities involved in the effacement of female subjectivity in third world patriarchal contexts, which in fact obfuscate rather than reveal the kinds of oppression that women face. By this I mean: do only unprivileged lower and working-class women suffer subjection in Muslim cultures? Mohanty has famously argued that given the sensationalized abuses that third world women suffer, the categories of third world women are automatically defined as "religious (read 'not progressive'), family-oriented (read 'traditional') . . . domestic (read 'backward'), and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight!')" (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 72). Such an assumption and a categorization of women vis-à-vis their subjectivities are equally unhelpful for understanding their position in societies (such as Pakistan) with a diverse cultural and ethnic background. For example, Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman*, which is set in the modern-day Sind province of Pakistan, also heightens the appropriation of Islam to suit feudal interests, albeit in different contexts as discussed in *Broken Verses*, *The Geometry of God* and *Meatless Days*. While Shamsie's, Khan's and Suleri's stories recount state-constructed victimization narratives of Pakistani women, the story of *The Holy Woman* revolves around Zarri Bano, a modern university-educated woman, who is forced by her father, Habib, to drape herself in the black *burqa* and become 'Shahzadi Ibadat' (a holy woman) in the name of the "centuries-old tradition of making of his daughter his heir" after the death of his only male son (57). With this scenario in mind, it is significant to note that the novel contextualizes oppression "in terms of historical complexities [including primitive feudal customs such as the one highlighted in the novel] and the many struggles to change these oppressions" (Mohanty 223). Bano belongs to one of those "Muslim countries that have an ideology of honour" (Bullock 103), according to which she is expected to maintain a customary dress code after she becomes Shahzadi Ibadat. However, what differentiates Bano from other disempowered women in her region is the fact that her (holy/customary) veiling does not confine or even seclude her within the private space of her (harem) home; her hijab is instead a "challenge to the traditional Islamic and Western association of veiling with seclusion". In so doing, the veil gives Bano a sense of "power and hence self-esteem" (Bullock 103), which in fact gestures towards the reconceptualization of veiled women as agentic by reconciling "agency with religion" (Zimmerman 145-157). More importantly, veiling in Bano's case is neither a matter of personal choice nor a religious obligation; in fact, it becomes a customary obligation for Bano. Given her strong love and respect for her father, Bano realizes that defying her parents' authority or confronting their traditional feudal customs would isolate her from her family and lineage; agency does not exclude one's sense of responsibility towards family and other social relations. Therefore, without outrageous resistance, Bano asserts her will vis-à-vis opening up

future horizons of action and self-development. Arguably, hijab ensures Bano's "visibility in the public sphere" which is quite contrary to the commonly perceived idea of "the effacement of women's presence in the public sphere" (Tarlo 132). Challenging any essentialized idea of collective victimhood, she therefore takes up her new role with pride and travels across the globe to declare her new identity as an Islamic scholar. Although Bano is expected to surrender like an obedient daughter whose destiny is "made and dictated" by the male members of her family (23), she nevertheless dismantles "various areas of masculine domination . . . building up a modern and gender-democratic Muslim society" (Kidwai and Siddiqui n.p), but without being outrageously rebellious. In Bano's particular case, veiling takes on an intellectual meaning that allows her to assert her individual identity regarding the patriarchal structure of her community and family. In so doing, the veil affirms her agency, rather than being a threat to modernity and secularism, something which Shamsie foregrounds in *A God in Every Stone* (2014) and which reinforces this ambient scepticism towards veiling through the character of Viv, an English woman who conveniently conflates Pashtun *pardah* culture with patriarchal conservatism without understanding the meaning of social practices from the inside. In one episode, when Viv wears a *burqa* in order to hide her identity while safely moving through Peshawar, she imagines herself to be "half-woman, half-tent". Viv's reaction to women in a *burqa* is significant:

The rage she felt on behalf of the women of the Peshawar Valley as she sweltered beneath the voluminous *burqa* dispelled any ambivalence she might have started to feel about Indian demand for self-rule. All these Indians talking about political change when really what this country desperately needed was social change. Why should they be allowed independence when they only wanted it for half the population? (218)

Viv's reaction clearly suggests that without liberating the contested topic of veiling from its religious context, it is not possible to understand the meaning of this cultural and ethnic practice. In *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (1999), Fadwa El Guindy, emphasizing the multiple meanings of veiling practices among Muslim women in the Arab world, suggests that rather than inappropriately labelling it as a symbol of oppression and control, the veil should be considered an agentic device for asserting modesty and resistance to materialistic culture. Moreover, as Rasmussen argues: "We still need to remind ourselves, however, that women in some parts of the world choose to veil, and they are often educated and economically independent, or about to embark on professions" (as quoted in Guindy 255). Women, predominantly from tribal and rural areas of Punjab, Sindh and NWFP, choose to veil, as do a significant number of women in Afghanistan. Similarly, Bano's veiling is symbolic of a feudal practice which nevertheless tropes her power and agency instead of constraining her.

Whereas Shahraz's Bano, rather than being helpless and dependent, becomes an agentic woman in self-assertingly facing the challenges posed by patriarchal structures within private and public domains, Khan's *Trespassing* debunks any essentialist and absolute constructions of South Asian women in an urban context through the characters of Dia and her Western-educated mother Riffat, a successful entrepreneur and an activist. The novel is significant in foregrounding macro-level economic and political structures, as well as micro-level structures such as family and interpersonal relations; neither women's agency nor her subjection can be imagined outside established gender hierarchies and institutional and structural contexts. *Trespassing* maps out the voices of simultaneously liberated and subjected, albeit agentic, women who negotiate challenges

and develop ways to cope within the context of their everyday lives. As Atasoy suggests, “[a]n emphasis on agency assumes that women are active, rational subjects who desire autonomy and self-realization by struggling against the dominant norms and institutions that oppress them . . . [yet this] belies the reality that women also actively adopt dominant norms that systematically constrain their options” (206). Although Riffat is an icon of female self-empowerment in the novel, she too experiences restrictions despite all the privileges of mobility and freedom that she enjoys in London. In spite of her family’s opposition, Riffat’s upper-class background provides her with a privileged position in choosing to run her family business herself, i.e. “the symbolic reinforcement of female subjectivity” (Kanwal 106). Nevertheless, she is forced to “accommodate both the power of social constraints and the capacity to act situatedly against them” (Fraser and Bartky 1992, 17). This is foregrounded in the text through her encounter with her lover, Shafqat, who categorically warns Riffat that she “can’t transport something that exists here to another place” (422). Likewise, Riffat’s daughter, Dia, again an urban upper-class woman, is simultaneously liberated and restricted. Being the daughter of an educated and liberal mother, Dia carves out an independent life of sex and pleasure within Pakistani patriarchal society. Without taking into consideration social values and norms that disapprove of forbidden love, she enjoys her passionate relationship with Daanish. However, she is also self-conscious because she is living in a society “[w]here a woman’s reputation was the currency that measured her worth” (289). The complexities embedded in these structures of power and oppression cannot be grasped only on the basis of gender disparities; other socio-economic determinants, such as social class, education and religion need to be taken onboard.

Another puzzling and complex phenomenon that has had its own problematic history of appropriation and exploitation is the intra-cultural subjection of lower-class (subaltern) women at the hands of privileged educated career-oriented urban women. Most importantly, in this particular case, class becomes a symbolic site where women are not only subject to violence but can also commit acts of violence. It is therefore important to discuss the notion of agency within the context of women of colour, beyond the static dichotomies and polarized arguments of submission versus resistance. Maha Khan Phillips’s *Beautiful from this Angle* features a subaltern female character in the form of Nilofer, a victim of honour killing, who is doubly subjugated in the novel. In her attempt to run away from abusive husband, Nilofer is further entrapped by Mumtaz, an inspiring activist who makes a fake documentary about Nilofer in order to win fame and fortune. The novel tropes multiple discourses inscribed on the bodies of oppressed Muslim women. Despite Nilofer’s victimization at the hands of her husband, instead of sympathizing with her, Mumtaz dramatizes Nilofer’s subjection. In order to make Nilofer look sufficiently exotic for a CNN audience, Mumtaz not only hires an artist to paint bruises on her face but also hyperbolizes her deprived situation through a painted mud hut made of cardboard and Nilofer’s murder at the hands of her husband, Fazal. This act clearly gestures towards the ways in which local/indigenous women’s activism can also be manipulative, particularly when aligned with other local/global political contexts (such as NGOs and human-rights movements), a situation which is far more complex than simplified static dichotomies of ‘modern’ (women’s rights) versus ‘traditional’ (the patriarchal suppression of women’s rights). “This rhetoric deftly folds feminism into modernity and assimilates terrorism to patriarchy. For the women of the world, then, there is a clear path: be modern, be democratic, and escape the clutches of patriarchal terrorists” (Eisenstein 424). When analyzed in light of such rhetoric, women like Nilofer become significant tropes for emphasizing dominant mainstream political and cultural discourses and projecting an image of Muslim communities with beleaguered women, thereby perpetuating the essentialist representation of

*burqa*-clad women that became a significant justification for waging war on terror and against Muslim countries. Consequently, women such as Nilofer are supposed to have less agency than modern women.

However, it is important to consider why such an assumption is not only fraught with problems but also misleading; an idea that deserves some unpacking here is that this 'modern'/'traditional' binary has a tremendous tendency to homogenize attitudes towards understanding the multi-dimensional oppression and the multifaceted nature of the problems that Muslim women have been facing. What I would like to emphasize here is that any universal assumptions about women's subjections have a tendency to contradict the actual on-ground experiences of women, especially those who are disenfranchised and oppressed, not only at the local level but also by global forces. This gestures towards an interplay of power at various levels of local and global socio-political contexts. This is precisely where Mohanty links feminism with "larger, even global, economic and political frameworks" (501). Against this backdrop, a more serious problem, that I suggest warrants due consideration, is the hierarchisation of women's status deeply structured by patriarchal values that exacerbate the vulnerability of women, such as Nilofer in local/global socio-political contexts, as highlighted in the novel. By this I mean that upper-class women, such as Mumtaz and Aynah, who claim to be working towards women's autonomy and welfare do in fact exploit Nilofer's unprivileged situation. The point I would like to emphasize here is that women are not only "victims of male patriarchal terrorists, such as Nilofer's husband; they are also dehumanised and objectified by privileged [third world] women who claim to be their saviors" (Kanwal 71), which gestures towards an altogether different dimension of women's subjection, defined by Martha Nussbaum as the "denial of subjectivity", which is foregrounded in the novel through email correspondence between the three friends about the casual narration of Nilofer's suffering. This correspondence reinforces the portrayal of Mumtaz's character as "the objectifier" who treats the object, Nilofer, "as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account" (218). Mumtaz dehumanizes Nilofer by ridding her of any human essence and merely considering her as the 'subject of her documentary'. I would argue here that it is not only males who objectify women, women also objectify women, thereby "minimiz[ing] the perception of the individual as fully human, such as denying that their feelings and experiences matter and having less concern when they are physically or emotionally harmed" (Heflick and Goldenberg 598). In addition to the point about women's vulnerability within their own societies that I am making here, the manipulation of Nilofer's situation also gestures towards a local/global nexus in 9/11 contexts, e.g. the war-on-terror rhetoric with regard to oppressed Muslim women has given enormous impetus to agendas of poverty alleviation and female emancipation, which Mumtaz ambitiously pursues in the novel. Mumtaz's callous treatment of Nilofer for her personal interest corroborates what Mohanty argues, that it is "especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South . . . that global capitalism writes its script" (Mohanty 514).

Feryal Ali Gauhar's post-9/11 novel, *No Space for Further Burials*, also scrutinizes a similar impact on Afghanistan of the 2001 World Trade Tower attacks and the subsequent 'war on terror' rhetoric in the last decade. Gauhar's narrative, in providing heartrending accounts of the mistreatment of women at the hands of radical Taliban in pre- and post-9/11 Afghanistan, flags up a serious question: are women's situations in post-war Afghanistan better than that of pre-war tribal Afghanistan? There is no denying that Afghan women have continued to suffer domestic violence in the name of tribal patriarchal brutalities, such as honour killing, rape and misogyny, but it cannot be gainsaid that when the US army legitimized the 'war on terror' to save women from the hegemony of the Taliban, they remained indifferent to the plight of women in

Afghanistan, leaving “no more space for further burials” (192). Therefore, the novel not only critiques Afghanistan’s desolate history of war waged by insiders, but also becomes a haunting indictment of humiliation and violence fuelled by outsiders, predominantly the US army. Post-war Afghanistan is featured in the novel as a land inhabited by “men with no arms and no legs, children with no eyes, women with no hair and no shame. They suckled babies who had no mouths” (192). Gauhar contends in the novel that there is a strong “need to liberate these people, the absolute necessity of enduring freedom” (51) from indigenous as well as foreign terror – ‘the war on terror’. Ellen Turner aptly sums up Gauhar’s concern in the novel that “the war is brutal and senseless for ordinary people, people like you, the reader, no matter what nationality, gender or religion you are” (122). Abu-Lughod’s observation about the utility of Orientalist constructions of Muslim women in the ‘war on terror’ rhetoric is pertinent to understanding the overarching concept of Gauhar’s novel. According to Abu-Lughod, US projects such as saving Muslim women and making “women’s (and men’s) lives better”, do in fact “reinforce a sense of superiority . . . a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged” (789). In Gauhar’s novel, interestingly, this is shown to be challenged by the subaltern Afghan women who despite their vulnerability in both pre- and post-9/11 Afghanistan become a symbol of resistance in an increasingly war-ridden region. A domesticated Afghan woman, Noor Jahan, Waris’s wife, whose name means “Light of the World”, ambivalently challenges Laura Bush’s so-called entwined narrative of Western human rights and women’s liberation (that tropes America’s just cause in Afghanistan) by assuming the role of “mother of all mothers”(47). Unlike the US-constructed image of a suppressed veiled Afghan woman, metonymically coded as a victim of both Talibanization and patriarchal Islam, Noor Jahan assumes a position in the asylum where it is her duty not only to make sure that all “the sane and insane alike, are fed” (48) but also to become the saviour of Anarguli, a woman whose body becomes a metaphor for male honour: “It seems as if everything is connected to a woman’s body – a man’s honour lives inside the body of a woman, and whenever that honour is violated, it is a woman’s body which must be punished”(147). However, Noor Jahan is not only a powerful voice for Anarguli but also ensures that Anarguli is taken care of until she gives birth to a beautiful baby girl, Sahar Gul, Rose of Sunshine, which can be taken as a metaphor for women’s liberation in Afghanistan.

It is precisely for the same reason that Khan’s portrayal of her agentive female protagonists (as discussed earlier with reference to *The Geometry of God* and *Trespassing*) is also informed by the troubling cultural and political dynamics that perpetuate reductive tropes of *burqa*-clad women, cynically described by Spivak as “white men[’s obsession with saving] brown women from brown men” (271–313), which has furthered the justifications for waging the 2001–2 war on Afghanistan that began after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. As Marranci argues: “During the Afghan anti-Taliban war, the Western mass media emphasized that this war, which cost at least 4,000 civilian lives, could bring democracy to the Afghan people and in particular its burqa-covered women” (Marranci 81). Abu-Lughod suggests that this kind of cultural framing, by highlighting the treatment of Muslim women within their own culture, tends to segregate the world into separate spheres, ultimately “recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, Us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas” (783–790). Referring to US President Obama’s speech on 27 March 2009, Khan writes bitterly that:

For the Afghan people, a return to Taliban rule would condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, *and the denial of*

*basic human rights to the Afghan people—especially women and girls.* The President failed to mention the conditions under which ‘especially women and girls’ have lived since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Human rights and women’s organizations, including the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, have warned that conditions for Afghan women have worsened, not improved. (“Women and Fiction today” n.p.)

The purpose of highlighting these facts is neither to deny the reality of women’s oppression in Afghanistan nor to defend the Taliban’s religious fundamentalism, but rather to suggest ways in which, by foregrounding harrowing images of *burqa*-clad women in Afghanistan, the US sanctioned its own illegal entry into Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gulf region and other Muslim countries. Khan, Gauhar and Phillips have particularly focused on this local-global nexus in their work.

Another significant point that merits attention here is that, in perpetuating women’s suppression, such as Nilofer’s oppression in *Beautiful from This Angle*, the privileged women of colour, such as Mumtaz, instead of destabilizing the first-world gaze at Muslim women, in fact advance not only their own materialistic interests but also macro-level interests where larger political, cultural and economic processes are played out. Here, writers such as Gauhar, Khan and Phillips reinforce a renewed post-9/11 focus on universal discourses, such as the increasingly popular human (and particularly women’s) rights framework used by some feminists within the third world. Apparently, it seems quite promising, given their (human and women’s rights activists) ability to mobilize local as well as potentially powerful international institutions on behalf of women. However, simultaneously, these efforts tend to overlook the very embeddedness in local and national specific structures that could make women’s movements and activism very powerful. To trouble these cultural and political dynamics, it is equally important to foreground the multifarious and problematic possibilities in articulating third world Muslim women’s subjectivities.

No wonder then that, rooted in the multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature of women’s subjection and agency, Pakistani Anglophone writing indubitably calls for new as well as alternative ways of thinking and acting. These writings emphasise a pressing need to develop a theoretical approach that is firmly rooted in the experiences of men and women from the third world, one which is informed by community-based relationships and responsibilities, both of which have intrinsic value in Muslim culture. This also involves (re)defining the terms power and agency and their meaning vis-à-vis multiple identities of women within third world contexts. Without paying attention to the differences and diversity in the contexts and agency of third world women when interpreting women’s subjectivities, it is impossible to confront dominant discourses and to claim pluralistic alternatives.

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