

**PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION: A FEMINIST STUDY OF  
THE CHARACTER SHAHZADA FROM QAISRA SHAH RAZ'S THE  
HOLY WOMAN**

**\*Bushra & Rakhshi Hasan\*\***

**Abstract**

This study focuses on the diplomacies that men use to subdue their women to make them submissive within their households. To achieve the purpose, the writer analyzes the character of Shahzada from a feminist perspective. The character is from the novel *The Holy Woman* which is a realistic portrayal of Pakistani Society. To provide a proper background to the study, the writer is going to explain the concept of Feminism, comparing the status of women in Pakistan and the status of women in Islam i.e. the state religion of Pakistan. Under the paradigm of qualitative research methodology, the researcher applies the feminist approach to support the main character Shahzada to challenge patriarchy. This study discloses how women are oppressed and exploited by their male counterparts and what are the factors that support male domination, in Pakistani society. The researcher has concluded that Patriarchy and the wrong customs and beliefs that prevail in Pakistani society are the root causes of women subjugation.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Patriarchy, women subjugation.

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\*Master Student Women University Mardan, E-mail: bushra.edu98@gmail.com

\*\*Mphil, Teaching Faculty, Women University Mardan

## **Introduction**

### **Feminism**

Feminism represents the problems that women faced in patriarchal societies and looks for commonalities of male and female in every field. It presents such ideologies which bring equal opportunities to all men and women and avoid sexism (Kaur, 2016). Initially, it emerged in Western societies, supported by the ideas that females are less valued than males which divide them into different contexts, i.e. cultural, social, and political (Yihan, Huang 1). The word "Feminism" first appeared in France, in the 1830s by Charles Fourier and then in 1882, this term was used by first self-proclaimed feminist, Hubertine Auclert in her magazine "La Citoyenne" (Offen, 1988). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Feminism, as a movement, spread all over the world. In 1910s, it got famous in most European countries and in 1920s, Muslim world also started to think about it and the rights that God revealed to women (Gorfati 7). It is neither the idea that women are superior to men nor it is about male suppression. It is a group of ideologies, political and social movements that just want to protect the rights of women (Flouli, 2017).

Feminist movement divides into three waves; first wave of feminism deals with the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' feminist movements in Europe and United States. It mainly talks about the educational rights, marriage rights, property rights, right to vote for women and better working conditions. Second wave deals with cultural inequalities and women's role in society. It first began in the early 1960s in the USA. Awareness about patriarchy, about stereotypical gender roles, domestic violence and gender-based violence are the key points of the second

wave of feminism. Third wave is considered as the sequel to the second wave. It started in the 1990s. The media portrayal of women and definition of women are the key concerns of the third wave of feminism (Flouli, 2017).

**Women's Status in Pakistan:**

In South Asian countries especially in Pakistan, there are different social tactics that are used to control women at every level in society. The main and common form of this control is patriarchy, which is the main cause of women's subjugation (Isran and Ali Isran, 2012). When Pakistan came into existence, it was written in Pakistan Act that Islam is the state religion of Pakistan and all the people of Pakistan will enjoy equal rights without any discrimination of caste, race, religion, and gender. However, Pakistani society is greatly influenced by patriarchal powers instead of Islamic values and tribal customs, wrong religious interpretations, and the feudal system have been imposed upon women in Pakistan (Amjad and Rasul, 2017). Females are the deserted beings in South Asian countries and because of the erroneous cultural constraints, there is no proper position for women in such countries (Shah et al, 2006).

Abdul Hadi states regarding women's position in our society, that unethical conservative norms and traditions that intend to subdue women are exercised on the name of religion and culture in Pakistan. These amoral customs are domestic violence, sexual harassment, forced marriages, honor killings and sexual assaults etc. He further says that a female who experiences such violence, cannot raise her voice because her exposure is considered as the loss of her respect within society or family (Hadi, 2017). The concepts of male ascendancy and hegemony acquire more attention in the tribal and countryside areas of Pakistan

because of their customs that initiate and give rise to these concepts to control female lives. Another problem in Pakistani society is that men deem women's sensuality, as a threat to the dignity of family. In other words, the idea of man's dignity is attached to females' sexual conduct (Asian development bank et al, 2000)

### **Status of Women in Islam:**

It is self-evident that Islam is a complete code of life and there are proper rights for women in Islam that were given to them 1400 years ago. In Quran and Hadiths, it is clearly mentioned that men and women are equal in Islam but they are not the same. They are physically and psychologically different from each other and according to these differences, Allah has assigned different roles and duties to them (Hatimy 1998).

Quran is clear regarding the equality of both men and women before Allah. In the Quran, surah Al-Nisa, verse 124, Allah says:

**“And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer- those will enter Paradise”.**

The other religions besides Islam called a woman as a baleful object but in Quran, the word “Mohsina” is used for a woman (Hatimy 1998). About the respectable status of women, Our Holy Prophet (PBUH) said;

**“Among you, the most respectable is the one who respects women and the most disrespectful is the one who disrespects the women”** (Ibn Majah).

Allah says in the Quran, in surah Taubah verse 71:

**"And the believers, men, and women are friends of one another. They instruct good, forbid evil, observe prayer and zakat, and obey Allah and his messenger. Allah will have mercy on these. Surely, Allah is mighty, wise".**

The above verse means that man and woman are advocates of one another, both in political and social fields. It is also the duty of a female to circulate the orders of Allah and his prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Females can play a part in lawmaking. They can also take part in battlefields, to give emergency medical treatment to the injured soldiers (Hatimy, 1998).

People have insufficient knowledge about Islam and sometimes they interpret Islam in the way that is better for them. Because of this ill interpretation, females are deprived of their legal and lawful rights in the name of religious conviction, for example, the rights of marriage and inheritance. In most Muslim societies especially in Pakistan, family members do not inquire a woman's consent at the time of marriage and if a female refuses her family's decision and marries according to her desires, then she is considered as a culprit and sometimes she is killed. Another right, from which women are starved in Pakistani society, is the right of inheritance, which Allah has given to them. For men, giving the property to females is equivalent to losing that property (Riaz, 2004)

The objective of the study is to describe the ways Shahzada was victimized and oppressed and the factors that support male domination. Through *Shahzada*, a character from the novel *The Holy Women*, the writer will analyze the socially constructed tactics and norms which are used to dominate women within the households, in Pakistani society. This study is significant for the readers in many

ways, as it provides knowledge about feminism, patriarchy, struggles of women in Pakistani society and status of women in Islam. The readers will come across the idea that How are women oppressed and subjugated by their fathers, husbands, and fathers in law, within the households, in Pakistani society? Whether they show any resistance against this violence and what are the factors that support the idea of male domination

**Research Question:**

1. How is *Shahzada* (mother of the protagonist) oppressed by patriarchy in the novel *The Holy Woman*?
2. What are the factors that support male domination which *Shahzada* faced throughout the novel?

**Literature Review:**

In literature review, the writer is going to review the prominent past studies carried out on the concept of patriarchy and the discrimination against women.

**Concept of Patriarchy:**

Different thinkers have different approaches toward the concept of patriarchy. A feminist psychologist, Mitchell defines patriarchy as it is a credo in which females are always subdued by their husbands and female's body is regarded as a property of men (Mitchell, 1971). According to Gerda Lerner, patriarchy means the demonstration of male ascendancy over women in society generally and over women and children within family particularly (Lerner, 1989). Jagger and Rosenberg, define it as a group of social relations, which create

distinctions between men and women and allow men to dictate their women (Jagger and Paula, 1993).

Nowadays, it has adopted a central place in feminist literature. It refers to gender inequality between males and females within household, community and social structures (Isran and Manzoor, 2012). In a literal sense, it means the rule of the father. In past, the term patriarchy was used to illustrate a particular type of family where a man was dominant figure and all members of the family, including junior men, women, children and servants, were under the control of that man. But nowadays, it is used more commonly as it refers to men who dominate and exploit women in a number of ways (Sultana 2012).

**Previous Studies:**

Females confront violence at different stages in life, which affect their personalities, mental health, and physical health and destroy the efficiency of their efforts (Akhtar and Muhammad, 2011). According to Rehana Kousar and Nadia, women are treated as playful objects. Men just praise their beauty and do not give them the right to express their free will (Kaussar and Nadia, 2014).

A recent study by Abdul Hadi concluded that patriarchal restraint over females is practiced through organized prohibitive codes of conduct, sexual orientation and the belief system which relates family respect to female ethicalness (Hadi, 2017). Similarly, Suranjita Ray in her study entitled "Understanding Patriarchy", determines that women are not only considered inferior but they also face suppression and inequality because of gender differences assigned by the society.

Women play an important role in the development of society (Akhter and Razaqat, 2011). They need not go behind the feminine traits that are created by the society and they are free to choose and decide the things that are good for their lives (Mafakhir, 2016). Muhammad Zohaib says in his research paper "Sidhwa's feministic thought in Ice Candy Man" that women are not inferior to men and they have also some needs and requirements which they want to accomplish in their lives (Zohaib Khalil et al, 2017).

Literature is a significant way to highlight the issues and problems that a woman faces in a society (Ahmad 2009). This study aims to analyze the novel "The Holy Woman" from the feministic perspective especially the character Shahzada that is the mother of the protagonist Zari Bano. The Holy Woman is a famous novel by Qaisra Shahraz in which she highlights the issues and sufferings of Pakistani women.

In the past, a lot of work has been done on the novel *The Holy Woman*. The researcher of this study is going to analyze the same novel from a different standpoint to highlight the sufferings of Pakistani women especially married ones.

## **Methodology**

Under the paradigm of qualitative research methodology, Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* will be analyzed. The focus of the study will be highlighting the novel generally and the main character 'Shahzada' particularly, through the lens of feminist theory. The researcher will read the novel thoroughly to come across the hidden ideas, opinions, and concepts. The extracts from the primary source,



novel, will be used as data, and secondary sources like journals, books, web sources and newspaper etc. will support and boost the writer's point of view. Qualitative research explores the amorphous data including the analysis of text, audio, video, surveys, and social media in order to find out the themes and certain ideas and concepts (Jackson et al, 2007).

Feminism or feminist theory will provide the theoretical structure for this research study. It will provide help and support in analyzing the character of "Shahzada" from the feministic perspective that how she is oppressed and mentally tortured by the patriarchal society. It will also help to produce some reformation and change by challenging male dominance

#### **Data Analysis and Discussion:**

Through the portrait of 'Shahzada', the problems of patriarchy and man-made customs and traditions, through which women are victimized and oppressed, will be analyzed and discussed. This study will use feminist theory to expose the motives that support male domination or patriarchy.

Shahzada is one of the main characters of the novel and the mother of the protagonist, Zari Bano. She is the wife of a rich landlord Habib Khan and mother of three children. She is 50 years old and a true image of loyalty, love, and kindness. Apart from that, she is a loving and supportive wife. In spite of all these qualities, she suffers a lot because of her male counterparts. Through Shahzada, QaisraShahraz skillfully discloses the sufferings and problems of those women who come across oppression, subjugation and exploitation within their own households through their male partners i.e their husbands, fathers, brothers, fathers-in-law, etc.

### **How is Shahzada oppressed by patriarchy?**

Oppression is the unfair use of authority or physical force to stop others from being equivalent and free. It also means to weigh down someone psychologically (Napikoski and Jone, 2018).

Oppression and subordination of women are the basic issues in societies where patriarchy reigns. There are socially constructed values and ideologies that men are superior to women and they are the most respectable figures in a society. The famous French feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues in her book *The Second Sex* that men regard themselves as the indispensable human beings and on the other hand they consider their women as the superfluous human beings (Beauvoir and Howard, 1969).

Men and women both have different positions according to the norms and traditions, which are shaped for them by their society. Women are always placed in a weaker position. They are divested from their rights and face different kinds of violence within home and society. In the novel *The Holy Woman*, Shahzada experiences mental and verbal repression. She is a kind of woman who sacrifices and surrenders herself to accept the oppression and the subordinate position within her home and society. Simone de Beauvoir contends that men have occupied primary dominant positions in almost every culture and society because their women have surrendered and yielded themselves to accept the secondary and subservient ranks rather than to revolt against men and to challenge their unlawful authority (Beauvoir and Howard, 1969). Society has a great influence on

the psyche of women. They recognize whatever society decides for them. Therefore, many women accept patriarchy and subordinate position easily.

Pakistan is a male dominant society. People love their so-called customs and traditions which, in a way or another, support male dominancy. They ignore the teachings of Islam when it comes to rights of women. Women are considered the servants of their households. They have no right to decision making. In simple words, they are not allowed to decide anything for themselves and for their family affairs. Shahzada is an example of such kind of women. When she tells her husband about the marriage of their daughter that their daughter is willing to marry Sikander, one of her suitors and her brother's friend, Shahzada is admonished by her husband and is reminded that he is the master of the house and he will decide what is good for Zari Bano.

**I am the head of the family and I will decide what is good for my Zari Bano. 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' (The Holy Women, 2002).**

Qaisra Shahraz shows us the true picture of our society that men consider themselves the authoritative figures in every field of life. They have the power to control their women's fate. According to Najia Asrar, the patriarchal structures which exist in our society control women at every stage in their lives, whether they are married or unmarried and men keep the crucial power of routing their women's destiny (Asrar Zaidi, 2012). Women are considered less important. Their opinions and views are not appreciated. As Shahzada talks to herself that:

**As a woman, she was of no consequence- her opinion counted for nothing. Laws unto themselves, men's words were commands, and they were born to be obeyed. They possessed a successful knack of reasoning, and making everything sound plausible (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

With the help of this quotation, Qaisra wants to expose the ancient traditional thoughts that are practiced until now that men have the right to command and they deserve to be obeyed because they are respectable figures. These thoughts are buried in a woman's consciousness by the society. These beliefs are just the creation of people. They are not natural. In the Quran and Hadiths, there is no concept of women's oppression and ill-treatment. A woman is considered an honorable and respectable personality in Islam.

In the last famous khutaba, HajjatulWeda, Prophet (PBUH) said:

**O, people fear from Allah in the matter of women, treats them carefully and fairly as Islam teaches you (Ibn Majah).**

There is no concept of patriarchy and women oppression. The problems and sufferings which are the fates of women are the results of the illiterate belief system of our society. According to Fatima Osman Ibnouf, most Muslim societies have their own norms and belief system instead of the teachings of Islam. Women in these societies, face a lot of problems. They ignore women rights which are assigned to them by Islam and revealed by Allah in the Holy Quran. So, women in most Muslim societies have been subjugated on the basis of their own local customs and traditions (Ibnouf, 2015).

Shahzada is a victim of her own conventions. After the death of Jafer, the only son of Shahzada and Habib, Habib Khan and Siraj Din decide to make Zari Bano his heiress and urge her to marry the Holy Quran to become a holy woman. As a mother, Shahzada rises up against her father-in-law and her husband. But the strong position and superiority of her husband overshadow her voice. He reminds her that she is merely a woman.

**It can and will happen! Do you think that you, a female, can prevent it? The scales are weighted against you, woman. (The Holy Woman 2002).**

“Holy woman or ShahzadiIbadat” is a tradition practiced mostly in Sindh, a province of Pakistan. This tradition is prevailing in those families that do not have any male heir and to keep the inheritance within the family, they make the first daughter of the family become the heiress and marries her to the Holy Quran becomes a *ShahzadiIbadat*. She is not allowed to marry a man (Daily Times, 2007). The purpose of this custom is to prevent sisters and daughters to inherit the property. This tradition is mostly found in the class of rich landlords (Zahra 2005).

Women have the autonomy of expression as much as men have. Their opinions are not neglected on the basis of their female gender (Ibnouf, 2015 ). However, patriarchy would not permit the freedom of expression for their women. They want full command over women. Shahzada also experiences such restrictions. She is unable to express her opinions. As a mother when she expresses her views about her daughter marriage and asks her father-in-law that

Sikander is best for Zari bano. He is amazed at Shahzada's boldness and questions her whether she or his son is the master of the house and scolds her.

**Amazingly, you have by-passed both Habib and myself. I hadn't realized what an industrious daughter-in-law I had. In fact, I am beginning to wonder who actually rules this home. Who is master in this house? You or my son, Habib.....? (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

Shahzada knows the traditions of her clan that as a woman how she should speak, behave and live life under the male ascendancy. Shahzada's behavior and her obedience in every matter show that patriarchy has a great influence on her mentality and her actions. Because of this, she suffers a lot throughout her life. Whenever she tries to rebel against the traditions of her society, she has to face the restrictions of socially constructed patriarchy.

Shahzada as a wife suffers a lot. She is a beloved wife when she obeys her husband. But when she stops obeying him, she not only faces verbal assaults but is also blackmailed and mentally tortured. She lives with Habib khan for 26 years and has three children but still, there seems no such closeness and this is because of Habib khan's patriarchal nature. Nasreen addresses the same issue in her study that life of the woman is very problematic and it is because of the different dispositions and attitudes of a male who are their custodians (Akhter and Rifaqat, 2011).

When Habib Khan rejects the proposal of Sikander for her daughter, Shahzada discards her husband's decision for the sake of her daughter's future. But soon, he pounds Shahzada's resistance and threatens her with divorce.

**If you encourage my daughter to marry this man against my wishes, I will divorce you on the spot, Shahzada -- not once, not twice but thrice! You will receive three divorces, three thalaks! And all at one go! (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

The most powerful weapon that the patriarchy has is the divorce. They use this weapon against their women whenever they want to. Divorce threats are the serious issues that women face on daily basis. Their male partners oppress them through divorce. They want their women to support them whether they are right or wrong and their resistance will end in divorce. Shahzada experiences this bitterness of patriarchy. To threaten a woman with divorce without any solid is like murdering her emotionally and psychologically.

Shahzada suffers more than her daughter, Zari Bano. She stands up strongly to turn down Habib Khan's and Siraj Din's decisions but the patriarchal values and restrictions surpass her voice and finally, she accepts that a woman's voice counts for nothing. Against her daughter, she supports her husband and the traditional customs and norms of her clan. She has been verbally and mentally abused for her resistance against the malicious opinions of her male counterparts. They wound her inner self by their cruel, harsh words and ruthless attitudes. Umm Reem says in her article "Verbal Abuse in Marriage: Words Can Kill" that verbal assault is more hazardous than physical abuse. There is no visible dent in

verbal abuse, however, it destroys the inner self and wounds the soul (Reem, 2011).

**What are the factors that support male domination?**

Pakistan is an Islamic country. Its rules and regulations are based on Islamic laws. However, some customs and norms which are contradictory to Islamic laws are practiced commonly in the country (UN, 2011). Regarding women status, for instance, customs and traditions are preferred instead of Islamic injunctions (Ibrahim, 2005). Women are considered inferior. Their opinions and feelings count for nothing. Like Shahzada, they have no right to participate in decision making related to their lives. On the other hand, men are the supreme authorities. They control the fate of their women and rule over their lives as Habib Khan pronounced to Shahzada in the novel that:

**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 (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

Another issue that has entrenched in Pakistani society is that it is considered very appalling for women to express and justify their opinions, feelings, and point of views confidently before male elders because it is against the nature. It is also unacceptable for "superior looking" Siraj Din that his daughter-in-law answers his questions instead of his son. The duty of a woman in their clan is just to serve the men, to take care of their houses and to obey their orders without questioning them.



**Siraj Din waited for his daughter-in-law to say something, to apologise for her temerity in both speaking and answering him herself instead of letting her husband do it. And to top it all, she then had the audacity to justify her action to him! (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

Our culture, traditions and norms are the driving factors behind male supremacy in every field of life. QaisraShahraz has addressed this dilemma of Pakistani society very clearly in *The Holy Women*. Male domination and women's oppression is practiced from centuries in Pakistani society and now this male domination has become a part of Pakistani traditions. Male passes it as an inheritance to their next generation i.e. father to his son, son to his male children and so on. It is unbearable for them that a woman stands before them. Habib's conversation with his father has verified that Siraj Din has taught him how to dominate your wife.

**Shahzada knows her place and her duties, as she has always done. I have not dominated her in the way you taught us to do and the way you dominated our mother (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

Habib's tyrannic nature and his patriarchy are because of his father. When Habib tells his father that he is unhappy because he has wronged Shahzada and she will never forgive him, his father bitterly rebukes him by reminding him his masculinity and tells him that he, his son, is the master of his house and he can do whatever he wants to.

**I don't like what I am hearing. Are you losing your masculine touch? Who is the master in your house? I am very disappointed in you'....'If you give in to your weakness, you will find yourself tied to your wife's *perandah*... Well!**

**You will be a woman in your house!' Siraj Din concluded, with a look of disgust on his face (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

If a man pays attention to his wife, he is regarded by his male elders as the slave of his wife and he is considered as a female by his male elders, females being a symbol of weakness. It seems awful for a man to take care of his wife because a woman is of no consequence in their opinion. However, in Islam men are encouraged and appreciated to treat their women well and take care of their rights. Regarding the matter of women's respect and proper position in society, the Prophet (PBUH) said:

**Among you, the most respectable is the one who respects women and the most disrespectful is the one who disrespects the women (Ibn Majah).**

**Among the Muslims, the most perfect, as regards his faith, is the one whose character is excellent, and the best among you are those who treat their wives well (Al- Tirmidhi).**

Siraj Din is upset when his son talks in his wife's favor. He doesn't like Habib's way of defending Shahzada.

**At your age, Habib! You are nearly sixty. Why do you care so much about your wife? you don't need a wife to live your life (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

A woman's role in a man's life is just to provide sexual pleasure. A husband contemplates that a wife's duty is to fulfill her husband's sexual desires. Siraj Din is also a man of such mentality. He wants his son not to care for his wife because he is now an old man and he doesn't need a wife. Women are treated as playful objects. The main purpose of their lives is to serve their men (Kausar, 2014). Siraj

Din declares to his son Habib that, if a man treats his wife with more consideration, his wife in response dominates him and then, he becomes a slave in his house. It is the duty of men to dominate their women because women are inferior to men.

**A man can make an utter fool of himself if he pays too much attention to his wife. Such women are capable of riding roughshod over their husbands (The Holy Woman, 2002).**

All these are socially constructed problems. The main factors which support patriarchy are our local and socially constructed norms and traditions.

**Conclusion:**

The Holy Woman is a true depiction of Pakistani society. It highlights various issues and problems that women have to face on daily basis within their homes because of the socially constructed patriarchy. Like Shahzada, women are considered inferior to men. They are deprived from their innate rights i.e. right of decision-making, freedom of speech. Their opinions, wishes, and feelings count for nothing. Their duty is to serve their men and accept their pronouncements happily. If they resist their decisions then they are subjugated and demoralized by different means i.e. physical abuse, mental exploitation, verbal violence, and divorce threats. Verbal and mental exploitation are the most common forms of oppression that women, especially married women, face on daily basis. All these evils are the products of ancient traditions and norms which support patriarchy.

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