

Threshold: A Spatial and Ideological Barrier in South Asian Fiction - A Case study of Pakistani Women Fiction Writers

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the symbolic significance of the threshold of home, a constructed perceptual barrier between male and female spaces, with reference to the fiction produced by Pakistani women writers. There are famous anonymous adages: “It is a man’s world” and “Woman’s place is in the home.” This sums up the reality as seen by patriarchy. Taking these notions as basis, spaces for women are defined. First category is “Home” and second category is “Outer Space”. This paper focuses on one space which is seen as the space inside the home, yet it is the separator between the inner space and outer space i.e. threshold. Crossing the threshold constitute an age-old form of restraint and constraint as far as South Asian religious, cultural, social and literary tradition is concerned. In South Asian tradition, this boundary-line or threshold is symbolized occasionally as *Lakshman-rekha*¹, a notion from Hindu mythology. This notion comes from *Ramayana*, which comprises a set of legends and stories and a rich part of South Asian literary and religious tradition. Complete works of twenty-six Pakistani women fiction writers, writing in six different languages were studied for this purpose. It was seen that threshold plays a significant role in determining the status of women of this society, i.e. if the women stays within the boundary-line or not.

Key Words: Threshold, women fiction writers, South asia, *Lakshman – Rekha*,

Introduction

In South Asian religious, cultural and literary tradition, *Ramayana* holds a significant place. Ramanujan (1991, p.46), as quoted by Hirst and Zavos (2011) states, “In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, ‘always ready.’” The notion of *Lakshman-Rekha* comes from *Ramayana*. Hakim (2013, p.9) narrates, “In

¹ *Lakshman-rekha* is a notion from Hindu mythology and is the line marked by Lakshman outside his brother Rama’s wife Sita’s abode, instructing her not to cross, thus limiting her mobility.

everyday speech, the phrase “lakshman-rekha” often serves as a metaphor for the regulated conduct and ascribed roles in society.” *Lakshman-Rekha* is a notion that has been much used in differentiating between socially constructed gender identity of males and females (Abraham, 2001). Sita from Ramayana crossed the line marked by her husband *Ram*’s brother, *Lakshman*. This line was called as *Lakshman-Rekha* in the story. She crossed this line and was caught by the men of *Rawan* in *Sangal Deep*. Since it was wrong for Sita to cross the threshold which was the boundary-line for her, she was caught by Rawan i.e. she got into trouble. So it is highlighted through this tale that whenever any Sita i.e. any pious woman who is told to stay within the line or threshold and she crosses it, she will surely get into trouble for this disobedience. Breaking the barrier or crossing the *Lakshman-Rekha* is actually a symbol of exercising one’s own will and making one’s own decisions. Choosing to exist as one wills implies disobedience which is not what a woman should do.

Taking the notion of *Lakshman-Rekha*, which originated from Hindu mythological tale, the Ramayana, this paper views the significance of the threshold of home which serves as a *Lakshman-Rekha* and draws a line of demarcation between male and female spaces. Though it is also true that the home, called as a female space is not truly or totally a female space as well. Doors, windows, balconies, roof and courtyard etc. also serve as spaces which suddenly become outer spaces of a home for the female (Salahuddin, 2016). For the purpose of exploring this spatial and ideological barrier i.e. the threshold in the context of literary texts by female writers of Pakistan, twenty-six women writers who write in six different languages were studied. The purpose was to see how this barrier of a threshold is actually the notion of *Lakshman-Rekha* and how it affects the minds of females and manifests itself through their imagination and expression.

Feminist Theory

For the philosophical and epistemological position of this study, Feminist theory has been taken into account. Feminist theory focuses on revisiting the world that men made and it offers a critique on Patriarchy. The dichotomy of Man’s World and Woman’s Place² is challenged. Janeway (1971, p. 9) writes, "Women’s place is a shorthand phrase which sums up a whole set of traits and attitudes and ways of presenting themselves which we think proper to women, along with the obligations and restrictions that it implies."

The framework of feminist theory assumes a sense of oppression and inequality in male dominant societies which requires a radical change in society as well as culture. It focuses on denying the existing approach of man towards woman as of taking her as a soulless, brainless and inarticulate creature

² A famous old anonymous saying states, 'It is a man's world. Woman's place is in the home'

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(Weninger, 1903; Jung, 1933)³. Feminist methodology is called as feminist because of the beliefs that work as the guidelines of this methodology. Saarinen (1998) writes:

Feminist writers have described the projects involved in the development of a new, feminist world-view as ones of deconstruction and reconstruction (Harding & Hintikka 1983, ix-xi). These projects are interwoven and together they constitute a spiral process of knowledge production which begins over and over again and which gets progressively deeper (Eichler, 1980, pp. 9-18).

The need to deconstruct and reconstruct arose out of the problem of a difference in relationship that men and women have with outer reality. The reality, called as constructed reality, is all but a male perspective. The male perspective alone cannot be called as a human perspective. So there is a need to include women's perspective in knowledge. This surely leads to the conclusion that language and meaning attached to words must come from women and the researcher should use the meanings given by the woman. Taking a woman's point of view would mean how a woman constructs her experiences in her own words. The use of a gender neutral language and avoiding Sexism (to use 'humankind' instead of 'mankind'), is an important issue herein as language does not usually value women equally as men. So the question arises if women are using a language of their own to explain the world around them or are using a language that has been shaped by the men? Feminist research is to take women's location and standpoint in the world as the foundation for research.

Selection of Writers

Many languages are spoken in Pakistan and we can easily call it as a region of multiple living languages. Official language of the country is no doubt an International language i.e. English, the National language is Urdu and it is the thread which actually bridges the gaps of communication of various Provinces and regions of the country. There are provincial languages and there are also regional languages. Some languages such as Punjabi and Sindhi, which are associated with the provinces Punjab and Sindh respectively thrive ancient origins and rich literary statures as well. Women writers of Pakistan have also indulged in writing in various languages, and in fact, Musarrat Kalanchavi proved to be the first writers of short stories in Saraiki language with a published book of the same language which came in 1976. For this research, women fiction writers of Pakistan writing

³ Weinger conceived two ideal types M and W, encouraging rash generalization. He held that women are not individualities, so they have no "Intelligible Ego", no personality, no soul, are not like men; "Monads". Such questions as personal style, desire for mortality etc. do not arise in them. They have no standards of their own. They are a-moral, not immoral. Jung assigned complementary parts to masculine and feminine. The "Persona" or outer character is feminine, the "Soul" or inner attitude is masculine.

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in following six languages were selected. It was properly investigated during the course of sample selection that these writers meet the basic criteria which also includes one higher notion that these are published in major literary journals of country which enjoy the stature of publishing “A” category fiction and are thus acknowledge by editors of towering standing. This is an important criterion in itself as the claims of popularity are enjoyed by many names, but they lack the originality and audacity of work and dissolve into oblivion within few years of their popularity phases. Following are the six languages selected:

- a. English (Official language of Pakistan)
- b. Urdu (National Language of Pakistan)
- c. Punjabi (Regional language of Pakistan)
- d. Pushto (Regional language of Pakistan)
- e. Saraiki (Regional language of Pakistan)
- f. Sindhi (Regional language of Pakistan)

Sample included the following writers of six languages who have been published and are acclaimed writers of fiction. Since there are more writers published in Urdu, the sample selected from Urdu fiction writers was the largest. The basic criteria for selection were:

- Pakistani Women
- Have been published in “A” category literary journals
- A minimum of two published books after the creation of Pakistan.

Further selection was done using snowball sampling. Various women writers were approached in this regard and a list of writers was made. Contemporary women writers were personally met or responses were recorded via email. Pakistani women fiction writers included in this study were as follows:

Urdu	Razia Fasih Ahmed
Afzal Tauseef	Tahira Iqbal
Altaf Fatima	Zahida Hina
Atiya Syed	Urdu and Punjabi
Bano Qudsia	Farkhanda Lodhi
Farhat Perveen	Punjabi
Fehmida Riaz	Perveen Malik
Hajira Masroor	Riffat
Jameela Hashmi	Musarrat Kalanchavi
Khadija Mastoor	English
Khalida Hussain	Bapsi Sidhwa
Mumtaz Shireen	Kamila Shamsie
Neelum Ahmed Basheer	Sindhi
Neelofar Iqbal	Noor-ul-Huda Shah
Perveen Atif	Pushto
Qurat ul Ain Haider	Zaitoon Bano

Table 1: Women Fiction Writers of Pakistan

Sampling of Texts

Sampling of texts from fiction is done through theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is the sampling technique which makes up themes, codes and categories

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upon analysis of data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). This process is repeated till there is a theoretical saturation point, i.e. “the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any theoretical insight about the emerging grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006).

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Qudsia writes in a novelette:

In this manner Rasheeda's ego formulated a boundary of reasons, causes and logic. It is difficult to put the first step out of home. Once her highness *Sita* crosses the boundary line, then the journey till Sangal Deep is crossed in the blink of an eye (Qudsia, 2004c, p. 464).

This extract has a reference from Ramayana where Sita leaves her home to visit Sangal Deep and crosses the boundary line marked by Raja Ram Chandr. This symbolic use of Sita herein shows how a girl in this society has to convince her own self to take her own decisions and put the age-old teachings and traditions aside. This is the feminist consciousness.

It is not necessary however that the threshold is visible; there are thresholds and other forms of barriers for a woman as well. These barriers are not visible, physical and concrete. Noor Bano is a powerful character from a story by Neelum Ahmed Basheer. She is married to the Qur'an in the tradition named *Haq Bakhshwai* and her mobility was restricted. She is told:

‘Sister, come back to your senses, you are a *Syedani* (From the birth line of Prophet of Islam SAW). What work do you have to go out? Will you dishonor us?’ Her younger brother who grew up in her hands became tall like a jinni in front of her and his face became frightening (Basheer, 1999, p. 170).

When she became pregnant, and her father and brothers confronted her, she simply said that I have a husband as you married me off to the Qur'an, so whosoever will move forward and touch my child will bear the wrath of the Qur'an. “She made the holy book the shield of her belly” (Basheer, 1999, p. 184). The threshold for Noor Bano is multi-faceted. This threshold is physical, emotional, psychological and religious. Her beliefs and emotional needs are compromised. She is one of the rare examples from fiction written by Pakistani women writers, who actually stands up and takes a rather bold step by challenging the honor, name and customs of her family and tribe.

Aaliya, a notable character from a short story by Khadija Mastoor also took her decisions in her hands and travelled to Pakistan, instead of staying in India, with her mother after partition of India and Pakistan. She agreed to marry her cousin Jamil Bhai because she respected his integrity and commitment to cause. But when she hear that he has also become like the rest, and has lost his integrity,

“Aaliya felt as if she has travelled from deserted lands from afar. Weary and tired, thirsty since many lives. Only if someone could pour a drop of water in her throat” (Mastoor, 2008, p. 798).

In an interesting short story by Razia Faseeh Ahmed, the character of *Phuphi* [aunt] is very significant. *Phuphi* is a woman who never crosses the threshold, but only when someone accompanies her. She is thought to be dumb as regards to worldly matters and it is believed that she has no ability to make decisions. One day she gets separated on the way and everyone was alarmed that she would never find her way back. But she did find her way back, she knew the address to her home and she knew that one should necessarily carry money when one is leaving the house. The irony of the matter is this; women even after realizing their selves, still choose to appear as foolish as men and society expect them to be.

Woman of today has discovered herself in the same manner in which *Phuphi* [the aunt] found herself on the day she lost herself. But after that *Phuphi* spent the rest of the days of her life just as before. Like many women of today, even after knowing themselves, want to spend their life under the shadow of a man's protection in peace and prosperity and never show that they know the way to their homes very well. They know which taxi leaves at what time and where it takes (Ahmed, 1984, p. 181).

Shareef Zadi [*Pious woman*] is a short story by Noor-ul-Huda Shah. *Zaibo* is the maid of *Shareef Zadi* (Shah, 2014, pp. 38-46) *Shareef Zadi* was apparently a pious woman and kept her outer facade of piety intact. When a man wanted to kiss her hands, she felt shy, though she had been kissed by many. “I want to kiss your hands.’ She felt shy with fear. She felt she heard these words for the first time. But Ahmad had kissed her whole body and before Ahmad, the clerk at school had also kissed her cheeks” (Shah, 2014, p. 44). These kinds of character are part of society, who just have to flow with the waves of time and who cross thresholds marked by society, however hiding behind their own selves.

Feeling of aloneness in a populated city... poison of tiny desires seeping into the body...loneliness creeping in every nerve... taste of stale water in eyes... as if a sea of stale water has erupted inside... At this time, the loneliness which is buried in some deserted part of heart... right now carries the dead body on shoulders... “What happened sister?” and seeing the line of tears in black eyes *Zaibo*'s massaging hands stopped. But she was silent and with a face drenched with death-like silence had still the colors of youth. In her black hair, there were many silver strands. Scared body and her own haunted self were filled in her eyes, which had her desires hidden therein (Shah, 2014, p. 38).

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Crossing the threshold intentionally means taking a charge of one's self and going out to explore the world with one's own eyes. The history of the restriction on mobility is very old. Chinese foot-binding is one major example of the restriction on mobility. This has also been mentioned in a short story by Qudsia. "Pigeon-like feet though restricted mobility but the gait of such women, walking by the help of these pigeons, becomes so delicate that the aesthetic sense of Chinese men is satisfied" (Qudsia, 2004c, p. 379).

Whenever a woman crosses the threshold intentionally, for example leaving house for love or to pursue career etc., most of the times she cannot cross it back in. But there are also certain incidents where a woman is outside the threshold not by her choice, like kidnappings and going missing for a few days. In case of such events as well, it is not easy for the people to accept her back. It also becomes a part of the prayer that the girl may be dead, instead of coming back after staying outside. This also stands true for only one night outside home. In the following excerpt from Riffat's short story, a girl returns home after she went missing during partition of the sub-continent. She is symbolized as a wound that can never be healed:

Elder daughter of Mai Kareemaan, who was separated during partition and was left in some village of Patiala in India, have arrived back. It is said that the one who forgetfully leaves in the morning and comes back at night is not called as forgetful. But what sort of a daughter is she who has returned at noon but no one hugs her smilingly and says... welcome back... but I felt when she was lost she became a sore of the heart and now as she has returned, she has become that sort of a painful wound which could neither be bandaged, nor left open (Riffat, 1996, p. 42).

A similar character is referred to in a story by Tahira Iqbal, but with a difference. She jumped into the well during the riots of partition as told by father, as saving honor was more sacred than saving one's life. This was a threshold many women crossed into eternity because they had to save their honor. Iqbal writes: "Father said, take bath in well, go.'... 'took bath, but never came out'" (Iqbal, 2003, p. 51).

Hina writes: "In every era, the fate of cities and women is the same" (Hina, 2011, p. 175). As far as partition is concerned, women writers wrote extensively on it and also on women and their stories from partition. Hina writes: "When do women of destructed cities return... here also ruined Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women have been swept under the carpet of freedom, with the broom of forgetfulness" (Hina, 2011, p. 179). The similar tale of partition and plight of women have been discussed in Sidhwa's works as well.

Hadn't he realized the havoc an occupying army running amok could wreck? What those armed men would do to women? To Feroza, who was only six

and tall for her age? The thought of victory-drunk thugs laying hands on my daughter was unbearable (Sidhwa, 2013, p. 6).

Women who were killed, raped and went missing during partition were not written about, they have become ghosts. It is good on the part of these writers who highlight them in their works. *Chata darya* [sixth river] (Lodhi, 1997, pp. 51-62) is a story by Farkhanda Lodhi. The region Punjab of sub-continent is called as the place of five rivers. At the time of partition, a Sixth River flowed which was the river of blood. Lodhi has symbolized the bloodshed in Punjab by the symbol of a sixth river. In her famous short story, *Parbati* (1996), Lodhi talks about a woman who had to cross the border into Pakistan and went back as a pregnant woman. In Pakistan, her name was Perveen, and back in her homeland, India, she was Parbati. Her husband wanted her to have an abortion. Parbati is a goddess from Hindu mythology; she was the wife of god Shiva, and also the symbols of Eve's expulsion from Heaven are pointed here. But the main symbol is earth; the life-giving earth. Since life was growing inside Parbati, Lodhi (1996, p. 55) writes, "Shiva left Parbati... Adam pushed Eve alone across Heaven. She was neither Parbati at that time, not Perveen. She was just a woman; fond of abundant love, the earth bearing fruits and flowers." And like earth, "her bosom was filled with treasures" (Lodhi, 1996, p. 56). "She was the mother and the soil and a boundary-line. Across that boundary, life; life sprouting generation after generation was safe" (Lodhi, 1996, p. 60).

As mentioned earlier, the threshold can be any barrier. Breaking barriers by girls is usually not accepted by anyone. The following excerpt tells that even roaming around with a washed face is not expected of a girl, as it seems to be an effort to catch attention, thus seen as stepping outside of her circle, crossing the threshold:

"Listen Lemo...! Good girls do not roam around with clean faces..."

"Why?"

"It is a sin"

"What is a sin...?"

"A sin...? Sin is a burden... you try to carry it and do not succeed... you try to hide it and to no avail... and don't walk straight like the daughter's of the Seth (the rich man)... Seth is Seth... we are we... everyone has their own circles... the real sin is actually to step out of your own circle" (Lodhi, 1990, p. 77).

In a story by Tahira Iqbal, two aunts were killed for stepping out of the *Haveli* (mansion): "Horse and camel riders were sentenced for death for coming near that wall, and Malik Gam's aunt was killed for peeking out of that lobby" (Iqbal, 2003, p. 25), and two mothers died during deliveries at home because it was considered as a shameless act to take women to cities and to hospitals:

...it is the tradition of our family that women cannot go outside *Haveli*. You know aunt's story. Two

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wives of great grandfather died during delivery but city and hospital, no way... total shamelessness, dishonor... the respect of our family... Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah... (Iqbal, 2003, p. 30).

In another story by Tahira Iqbal, a woman's husband left for abroad and never came back. In her aloneness here, burdened with duties of family and children, she found a space for herself, across the threshold. But one day her son asked: "Mother from where you are coming at this time. And what is this noise outside?" As if he was his father or big brother. She was reduced to a twelve years old girl in front of his cruelty and strictness" (Iqbal, 2003, p. 57), and her reply was: "Get aside. Like father, like son. Why don't you ask who didn't tell, didn't inform... leave it and get away from my path" (Iqbal, 2003, p. 58). She took things into her hands for a while, but her son caught her, and restricted her from going. She knew the car was outside, and if she will lose the chance, she might not have a life ever again. But it was her son who stopped and she could just cry over it.

A nose-ring was considered to be the symbol of teenage unmarried girls in the Pushtoon tradition. This ring in the nose becomes a barrier for a young girl to keep her piety intact and not to break the circle. In a short story by Pushto writer Zaitoon Bano (1959), the character Maro is an important character and she is fond of wearing jewelry and still unmarried at the age of over fifty, she keeps on wearing that nose-ring of hers. One day she realizes that she is old enough not to be a teenager, in a potential age of marriage so she took it away. Her sister asks her why she removed it and Maro replies, "I found myself ugly..." and when her sister grew up to be of the same age, she thought "nose-ring can dangle from teenage girls' noses. That is why she removed it from her nose and put it in the jewelry box with other jewelry, which was placed next to years old silk fabrics." This excerpt throws light on the bounds of customs as well. Sometimes the acts are meaningless, yet a person keeps on doing them persistently. This sort of an attitude is also very prominent.

The division of spaces defines the gender roles and constructs that place women and men in "their" place. These spaces become "naturally" defined categories of existence for two genders. Women, if step outside the threshold, enter the realm of men. In this world they are and are supposed to be misfit, insecure, out of place and available. Apart from these assumed connotations of crossing the threshold, women also become "bad" from "good" women by crossing this boundary-line. This may appear like harsh generalization, but this has been and still is the way things are in this society. When it is said that things are changing and will be changed, the idea is still limited to a very small group of people. It is not that all women are actually good and all men are bad, but the percentage of believers of this concept of a good and bad woman is alarming and forms of oppression are definitely high as regards to women.

There are binaries of entrapment and escape and multi-faceted images of caves, thresholds, walls, balconies and *Lakshman Rekhas* in the works of women writers as well as outside these works, in the lives of women. These caves and

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spaces inside thresholds or *Lakshman Rekhas* are the spaces of good women. Stepping out of these, she does not remain a good woman. She becomes a bad woman.

Conclusion

It was observed during this research that while women writers of Pakistani society were busy exploring their potentials to the fullest and growing with the changing trends of society, the readers can see how they present a picture of what surrounds them and a picture of who they are.

It was seen that these women writers are well-aware of the barrier placed on women of this society in the form of the threshold of a home. They have symbolized it in varied forms and highlighted the barrier in its concrete as well as abstract sensibility.

Apart from this one notion under discussion, it was found out that each theme dealt with becomes a reflection of the understanding of the female mind and the ways in which their eyes view themselves and the forces that define or try to define their image. It was also observed that there were several ways in which women have tried to redefine themselves and change the existing clichéd labels. It remains to be analyzed however that how much a woman owns the place which is seen as necessarily womanly i.e. the home and also as regards to the second category, where do women exist in the outer world, which is necessarily seen as man's world.

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