

## **Representation of Women in Postcolonial Literature in Pakistan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article attempts to explore, investigate and analyze the postcolonial Urdu writings on the Pakistani women's participation in the socio-economic, religious and political arena. Urdu literature is spread all over the subcontinent and there are no borders in literature that can split it into two. This article would like to discuss literature mainly produced by Pakistani writers. However, while arguing that most literature has been written from a patriarchal viewpoint throughout the history, two main themes dominated the postcolonial literature firstly, role of women in the patriarchal society and other, the trauma of migration and its impact on the Muslim women in Pakistan. Islamic influence enforced purdah on Muslim women and purdahless women were regarded as infidel and shameless in literature. Nineteenth century Muslim writers advocated modern education for women not with the idea of emancipation but with a view to creating the modern wife, sister and mother. In this context, we can see that Allama Rashid-ul-Khairi's modernist writings which were apparently sympathetic to women, were in fact meant to strengthen existing gender arrangements. The Progressive Writers' Movement brought about some change in the representation of women and the family, for example, Sajjad Haider Yaldram, Azeem Baig Chughtai and Ismat Chughtai depicted the negative side of the patriarchal society in which women were being exploited. The horror and trauma of partition enabled writers like Saadat Hasan Manto to highlight contradictions within the apparently monolithic institution of the family. Aziz Ahmad and Qurat-ul-Ain Haider also poignantly painted the picture of disintegrated lives and the anguish of exile. This article also demonstrates that male domination is consolidated through binary constructions of good women and bad women in society. This has been a continuation of nineteenth century notions of Muslim womanhood most clearly portrayed in Deputy Nazeer Ahmad's novel *Mirat-ul-Uroos*. The article will encompass the representation of women in Urdu literature during post-independence Pakistan. The influence of patriarchal mindset of the society on literature will also be discussed

**Key Words:** Urdu, Literature, Sub-continent, Patriarchal Mindset, Women

### **Introduction**

Literature is the manifestation of the society in which it stems and thrives. It not only represents and influences the living styles of the society but also responds changes in the society in an appropriate manner. For example, a fiction writer

portrays an ideal world which instructs and aesthetically pleases the reader and enhances upon the existing pattern of circumstances. Urdu Literature even before partition was voicing its concern about the rights of women. The tradition of Urdu literature has also been carried out by the English literature produced in this area.

While writing about the depiction of women by Pakistani literature, we should always keep in mind three factors. Firstly, the depiction of women in Pakistani literature must be seen in the context of postcolonial feminism because the literature produced in the (previously) colonized areas was mostly reaction against the negative illustration of the local culture by the colonizers. Postcolonial writers mostly portrayed the injustice, oppression and exploitation by the colonizers. As Bill Ashcroft suggested

“Postcolonial writers explore themes of struggle for independence, culture and displacement in their local settings. The use of these themes in the writings of postcolonial writers is not accidental but a deliberate phenomenon”.(Ashcroft, 2002).

In this context, feminism is the most important theme of the literature produced during post-colonial era.

Secondly, the literary scene in the post-independence Pakistan had traditionally been dominated by male Urdu writers, poets, novelists, short story writers and dramatists. The reason for such dominance was largely because the literary traditions among the Muslims in the sub-continent did not allow women’s voices to be heard in public. Culturally, women were not in a position to find recognition as individuals due to the spatial segregation of the sexes. These women writers after partition tried to demolish the societal norms set down by the patriarchal family and remained successful in breaking the norms by writing short stories and novels focusing on the trauma of partition and aftermath of the mass migration, bloodshed and displacement at all levels of the society. (Bhalla, 1994).

Thirdly, The Partition of the sub-continent left a deep impact on the patriarchal society which had been brought to life in Urdu literature. The institution of *purdah* which had been a fundamental pillar of the Muslim family structure was severely fractured and women had started coming out of the confines of their homes. This situation also affected literature, and from the 50’s to the end of the twentieth century, we see women as an equal level with men in novels and short stories. (Shrin, 1963). However, women poets were not, yet, supposed to participate in *mushaira* due to social and cultural segregation.

Saadat Hassan Manto (1912-1955) advocated women’s freedom and represented different shades of women in oppressed society in his short stories. He played the role of spokesman in depiction of his leading female characters. He criticized the double standards of society where women were submissive and men were dominant. He reacted to hypocrisy within the patriarchal family.

The height of his revolt against the family’s restrictions and rules is that after marrying girl, his one character kidnaps his own wife and takes her somewhere else (Shrin, 1963). In his *Thanda Gosht* he takes the dehumanization of male dominated family to the limit.

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On the other hand, Rajinder Singh Bedi's (1915-1984) stories, *Lajwanti*, *Grehen* and *Apnay Dukh Mujhay Day Do* make an effort to preserve the existing structure. Bedi's stories are about families that have been torn as under by the spear of strife and violence. These are families in which husband and wife, though living together and being kind to each other, are faced with an inexplicable loneliness about which writers other than Bedi also wrote. Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) was one of those few writers who challenged the exploitative patriarchal structures by writing about certain forbidden topics that people chose to put under the carpets; topics that were precisely the 'questions of silence'. She was amongst one of the most accomplished and progressive Urdu writers of the twentieth century whose writings were bold, fierce and stunningly evocative. She had to face the charges of obscenity for *Lihaaf* (Chughtai, 2001). She wrote during the times when women writings and writings about women was seen as crossing the boundaries of morality and respectability. Chughtai violated the set patterns of society and questioned the male monopolized interpretations of religion. She was highly influenced by Rashid Jahan who was a vehement supporter of women's writings for women from a woman's perspective and was against the idea of those husbands who treated their wives either as reproductive machines or as glorified servants.

Her novel, *Terhi Lakir* (Chughtai, 2001) shows the family weakening in the face of a modern, educated, socially independent woman and her novel *Nanni ki Nanni* is a slap in the face of the male chauvinistic society. Here, the venerated, religious, conservative head of the family who is eight year-old Nanni's guardian, turns around and makes her the target of his lust. In *Nanni ki Naani* the character of the Deputy Sahab heralds the death knell of the fact that father, the guardian and protector who used to be God to the family, and under whose safe keeping it was assumed that all his relatives would breathe in peace.

Ismat Chughtai was the first person to write successfully and relentlessly about the death of the family as an institution. She was followed by Hajira Masroor, Jillani Bano and Wajida Tabassum. Wajida Tabassum showed a great ability to develop her stories and wrote about various aspects of the family in a feudal society. However, she started to write pulp fiction after becoming a victim to commercialism. Jillani Bano's short stories and novels cover similar ground in a very sensitive and sympathetic manner. Her latest novel, *Promise* is a complete and sympathetic depiction of the chaos of the modern industrial age, the migration of family members to Europe, America and the Gulf countries in the pursuit of a better life and the disintegration of the joint family.

Qurat-ul-Ain Hayder (1927-2007) lived a very independent life on her own terms. Though she did not actively campaign for it like others, she is considered to be a feminist literary icon. As a writer, she paved the path for future female writers of South Asia, mainly India and Pakistan. She wrote on topics which were usually considered bold for women. Through her works, she challenged the stereotypical representation of women in South Asia and portrayed them as capable individuals who were in no way lesser than any man. The female characters in her novels were

as strong and able as her male-characters but they did not have equal opportunities as men- a basic representation of South Asian society and patriarchy. She made her mark in the world of Urdu literature and happens to be one of the first female Urdu novelists. She inspired many to take up her legacy and continue the work that she was doing. She has portrayed the emergent and upstart society of Pakistan; it seems that she could foresee the shape of things to come (Hashmi, 1980). Her autobiographical novel, *Gardish e Rang e Chaman*, a cultural historical document about changes in history and culture, spoke about the post 1857 era and the tragedies befalling women of respectable families. Her novel *Chandni Begum* was based on the general social condition of Muslims forty years after the partition. In her four novels, *Chaye ke Bagh*, *Dilruba*, *Sita Haran* and *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya na kijo*, she explored the theme of gender injustice and deep-rooted misogyny in the South Asian region.

She is, perhaps, the most prominent Urdu fiction writer who combined cross-cultural traditions where her characters never surrender their individuality. Her novel *Aag ka Darya*, acknowledged to be a *magnum opus* by a majority of people, is a novel about the flow of time and the different phases of Indian civilizations. The novel encompasses thousands of years of Indian history from the Vedic times to post independence. The central theme of *Aag ke Darya*, shows that the Muslims of the Indian Sub-continent crossed a great river of fire in pursuit of a great ideal, which had completely lost after Independence. A letter written by one of the characters in the novel, a man who has settled in Pakistan after Partition, bears witness to this sense of disillusionment. Writing to a relative in India he says: We are going to start the work of building and constructing in our new country- which reminds me-I have started having a new Italian villa built (Haider, 2015).

The great shock she gave to the Pakistani state and Pakistan's patriarchal structure was her renunciation of Pakistan's citizenship letting it to known that literature is not a nation in which state or religion can be allowed to interfere.

Ada Jafri (1924-2015), a prominent poetess, has contributed a lot to women's literature. She is highly talented and conscious artist who has popularized female sensibilities by expressing their sentiments and problems. Ada was born in a traditional society where women were not allowed to think and express independently but she was bold enough to express herself without inhibitions. The unification of modern and traditional sensibilities makes her significant for the both schools of thought. The expressive value of her poetic art makes her a prominent figure in contemporary Urdu literature. But Ada Jafri could not resolve the conflict between traditional and modern sensibilities and both trends reflect themselves into her poetic art (Badayuni, 2013).

Kishwar Naheed (b.1940) was famous for speaking bluntly. Her straight forward approach on some sensitive issues regarding women made her name across the country. She is widely acclaimed for her sharp and incisive poetic expression, for being bold and direct and for celebrating the universal human struggle for equality, justice and freedom. Kishwar Naheed migrated with her family to Pakistan in 1949; she was nine years old at that time. Defying the norms

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she fought to receive formal education as women were not allowed to attend the school at that time. As a young girl she was inspired by those girls who had started going to Aligarh Muslim University in those times. Kishwar Naheed spent a working woman life, raising two sons and supporting her family after her husband's death. She held administrative roles in various national institutions. She has founded an organization *Hawwa* whose goal is to help women to become financially independent through cottage industries and selling handicrafts. (Nahid, 1993). Her Urdu poetry has also been published in foreign languages all over the world. Her famous poem, *Hum Gunahgar Auratain* (We Sinful Women) (Ahmad, 1990), is known among Pakistani feminists as women's anthem. Naheed also champions the cause of peace in South Asia and has played a significant role in promoting Pakistan India people's Forum and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Writers Forum. Her powerful poems against extremist religious thought, violence, terrorism and increased suffering of women and girls due to radicalization have created waves locally and internationally.

Fahmida Riaz (1946- 2018) was a progressive Urdu writer and a poet of resistance who went through hardships in her life but never gave up her mission and beliefs. She remained an activist in her academic life and wrote against the ban on students politics during General Ayub's regime. She had started working at a very young age and started issuing her own Urdu publication *Aawaz*. *Aawaz* was later banned for its revolutionary ideas and publishing articles containing liberal views against the government of Ayub Khan. Consequently, her family had to spend almost seven years in exile. According to her views, feminism is simply that women like men are complete human beings with countless capabilities. They have to achieve social equality. They have the right to walk on the road without being harassed, to swim or to write a love poem without being considered immoral. She commented that *purdah* (veil) was a matter of choice for women not a necessity, just like a beard for men. (Riaz, 1986) *Badan Darida*, her collection of verses, is considered to be a milestone in the development of feminist thought in Urdu poetry.

Parveen Shakir (1952-1994) was a great Urdu poetess of Pakistan. She was the first woman poet to give power of speech to emotions of women, which were considered forbidden in the conservative environment of Pakistan. Aziz Ahmad commented that Parveen Shakir cannot be viewed as a feminist poet. She is very well celebrated and highly revered but her poetry is mostly romantic, traditional and compromising in nature. Wherever she tried to explore the theme of physical love, for example, she did it with complete approval according to the male chauvinistic standards prevalent in Pakistani society. (Ahmad A. , 1967) C. M. Naim has commented on Parveen Shakir's poetry in the same manner. He says that her *Khud Kalami* is not an act of criticism like Kishwar Naveed's but it is *a cry of pain*, which shows lack of courage on the part of the poet. (Naim & Shakir, 1967).

Aziz Ahmed (1914-1978) is a prominent name in Urdu literature, but one that is taken in far too much haste. Aziz Ahmed's novels are a very reliable source of a detailed account of the step-by-step demolition of the family. He did a very good

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job of bringing to light the tension between a declining feudal system and the upcoming educated middle-class, in his *Guraiz*, *Hawas* and *Aisi Bulandi Aisi Pasti*. His historic stories and novelettes, *Zarin Taj*, *Khudang Justa* and *Jub Aankhain Ahan Posh Huwein* highlight those characteristics of the patriarchal family that have been lost in the shadows of the past (Ashfaq, 1993).

Intizar Hussain (1925-2016) is considered to be an important entity in Urdu literature. In his stories, we find that he looks deeper into the hidden corners of the self, the value and essence of existence, social and spiritual debasement and the secrets and mysteries of domestic relationships.

The English writings by Tazi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsi, Mohsin Hamid and many other writers write stories of independent women. Other than Urdu and English writings, it is the folk literature of Pakistan that offers further insight into the dual aspects in a woman's persona; a romantic heroine and a fearless person. In the folk tale of *Heer Ranjha*, Heer is not the heroine because of her beauty but because of her courage to withstand taboos. The romantic stories of *Laila Majnoon* and *Shirin Farhad* reveal empowered and fearless women who are faithful to their lovers and are able to face all kinds of pressures from their own families and clans. In the story of *Mirza Sahiban*, Sahiban falls in love with Mirza and is not willing to conform to tribal pressures. In *Sassi Punun*, Sassi travels across the barren deserts of Sindh and Balochistan in search of her Punun who have moved on. Sassi and Punun immortalize love despite all the human and natural impediments. In *Sohni Mahinwal*, Sohni swims across the river to meet her lover, Mahinwal who sits on the other side of the bank. Sohni emerges as an ultimate heroine even when she drowns.

What that have been written of so far, only indicates the trends in literature. The study has not been able to mention many of the worthy writers who have been writing over the period under discussion. This research tried to deal with various facets of the patriarchal family and have either perceived women as inherently weak and rejected them, or in whose work the woman has come forth as a complete human being.

### **Women journals and magazines**

The analysis of different historical epochs exposes that the education of women had never been the priority of orthodox Muslims before partition. This state of affairs not only subsisted until the inception of Pakistan but even after independence for a sufficient period of time. Even nowadays, there exists a wide gap between the literacy rate of men and women in Pakistan.

In the British India, the Hindus were more dynamic and enthusiastic than Muslims towards learning modern education and English language. (Judih, 1950) Raja Ram Mohan Rai (1772-1833), a renowned Hindu reformer, was the pioneer in this field. He persuaded Hindus to acquire western education and issued journals and magazines in Persian and Bengali languages from Calcutta in the beginning of nineteenth century. The motive behind the publication of these

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periodicals was to bring reformation in Hindu culture and society. The Muslims had realized the challenges of the times much later when they had been cloistered by the Hindus and the British. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) performed the same task for Muslims half century later when he observed their wretched condition after the failure of war of independence in 1857 (Khursheed, 1958).

First Urdu newspaper *Jam-e-Jahan Numa* started in 1822. It was a weekly paper but it continued to work for a very short period of time. The Muslims started the work of newspapers in 1836 with the publication of Delhi Urdu Akhbar, hurred by Maulvi Muhammad Baqir. The defeat in struggle for independence had also affected the business of newspapers of the Muslims. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan exhibited his services in reviving Muslim press and in the last quarter of the 19th century, publication of some newspapers like *Paisa*, *Akhbar*, *Rafiq-e-Hind* and *Muhazzab* was started by the Muslims (Zaidi, 1985).

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After partition in 1947, a weak press was attained by Pakistan. In fact, most of the newspapers and magazines were possessed and maintained by non-Muslims even in areas forming Pakistan. These newspapers and magazines were either moved to India or stopped their publications in Pakistan at the time of independence. Thus, in the early years, Pakistan had to face a serious challenge in the field of journalism to rebuild it up on strong foundations. (Jiom, 2000) In 1948, a daily Urdu newspaper “*Khatoon*” was started from Lahore by Fatima Begum, a worker of Pakistan movement. This paper was not well managed and could not be run for a long time because of financial constraints.

A daily newspaper *Inqilab* was started from Lahore in 1927. In this paper, a page was published labeling women’s page on daily basis. The main title of the page was *Nisaiyat*. It contained articles relating to women’s elevation and welfare, recipes of foods, information about knitting and stitching. One more newspaper, daily *Imroz* started publishing women’s edition weekly in 1949. Women’s section was also started by *The Pakistan Times* being published on Sunday. This tradition was also followed by *the Dawn*.

Nowadays women’s editions are being issued weekly in almost all English and Urdu newspapers under different titles. (Ali, 1991) It can safely be stated that advancement in the field of journalism in Pakistan is remarkable keeping in view the educational, political and economic conditions of Pakistan. Particularly the development of electronic media and women’s journalism in Pakistan is outstanding (Juilin, 1975).

As far as their contents are concerned, all Urdu magazines are similar to a great extent. The most favourite and widely read contents are short stories and novels in these magazines. Other commonly shared topics by every magazine are recipes, home decoration, dress, health, beauty tips, child care and poetry under varied labels. In every magazine, two or three pages are reserved for letters to the editor available with different titles. Pictures of women belonging to different

professions mostly from showbiz are printed on title page. However, quantity of pages in different magazines differs to various extents. All women especially belonging to middle and lower middle class women are the passionate readers because these magazines successfully satiate their emotions. Although, all magazines have selected group of writers, they also welcome the writings of readers and give space to the worthwhile writings. Advertisements are also an integral part of the magazines (Jim, 1998). Furthermore, women's editions are published in almost all the major English and Urdu dailies. The difference between women's magazine and women's edition of dailies is that serialized novels or short stories are a major part of magazines while no novel or short stories are included in editions (Hijazi, 1998). The English newspapers publishing Women's Edition on regular basis are, *Dawn* English publishes NGO related activities of women on Friday. Reports about women's educational activities are published on Thursday in *The News* (English). *Daily Times* (English) publishes reports about Women's wellbeing on Saturday. One more English newspaper, *The Nation* publishes interviews of prominent women on Wednesday.

Major Urdu magazines in Pakistan relating to women are *Hoor* (1938) published in Lahore by Khowla Qureshi, *Pakeeza* (1971) published in Karachi by Mairaj Rasool, *Khawateen Digest* (1971) published in Karachi by Mehmood Riaz, *Dosheeza* (1982), *Kiran* (1988) and *Shoaa* (1997). (Khan, 1989) All these magazines are monthly publications and publish in Urdu. The contents are commonly shared in almost all magazines. Romantic love stories and novels, children's care guidelines are at the top of the list of contents of every magazine with different names or captions.

The status of women in Pakistan is enhancing with the passage of time. More and more women are getting education and adopting jobs in different departments. They are aware about their rights and are determined to sort out their problems. The role of electronic media cannot be ignored in bringing positive change in society and creating awareness among women about their rights.

Women's programs on radio and TV prove that women are taking part in the field of journalism and it is developing fast as the fourth estate in Pakistan (Idress, 1982). The newspapers, magazines, television and radio programmes not only play an important role in educating women by short stories and serialized novels but they are a valuable source of information about household, cooking, dressing, fashion, health, children's upbringing etc.

## **Conclusion**

Pakistani literature is the continuation and extension of the literature produced under the colonial rulers in India. As such it has inherited all the pros and cons of the literature in India before the end of the colonial rule in Indo-Pak subcontinent. Feminism has been one part of this larger body of literature. All this makes Pakistani literature a part of postcolonial literature. Moreover, Pakistani writers have described the lives of Pakistani women under the imposing role of religious,



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social and economic considerations. These roles of women are partly traditional and partly modern.

In the last couple of centuries, Urdu writers have been so engaged with the issues like future of humankind and its helplessness in the face of the universe that the development or destruction of the family have got left behind. The rioting, wars, massacres, political despotism, sectarianism, ideological rigidity, communal and racial bigotry that used to be restricted to one area at a time in earlier times have now spread over the entire face of the earth. This is why most of the writings speak of the loneliness of human beings, their helplessness, the terror of war and hatred, egotism and the different manifestations of meaninglessness of life. For them, the development and destruction of the family is not the supreme issue, as it was for Deputy Nazir Ahmed or Rashid-ul-Khairi.

Moreover, literary women prominently figure in Pakistan's scholarly literature with their presence not merely as symbolized beloveds but as empowered lovers, concerned humans and politicized individuals who feel the ordinary pains and sorrows of life. Parveen Shakir's poetry is more romantic and focuses on sensory love while Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz go beyond the sensitivities of romance. To them women's empowerment, protest against oppression and secularist ethos is more important.

In the West, the family as an institution has already been destroyed. The Romanticism of the Victorian era has happily come to an end while the momentous and fiery meetings of man and woman have become an obsolete subject. The defeat and destruction of the family as an institution is actually the demise of the patriarchal society. The fast emerging industrial, scientific and technological revolution has struck a mortal wound to the patriarchal structure of the family. These institutions are collapsing in the West. In the East, too, this process is under way and it is having a great impact on the sub-continent and its literature.

It is not possible to predict about the future of the family and about the conditions on which men and women will agree to coexist on earth but it can certainly be said that in the twenty first century, men will try to regain their control over women because women are demanding an equal share in the running and administering of the state and government and the territory over which men held unrivalled sway is now slipping from of their grasp. Women have proved their right to intellect and enterprise and they have science and technology as significant supporters in acquiring this long-usurped right. Women of Pakistan like other parts of the world are proving their mettle in the literature of not only Urdu but in all the other languages of the sub-continent. Now it is the responsibility of every citizen to develop the creativity and craftsmanship of women and compile a genuine literary and historical curriculum for men that will help remove the cobwebs of men's custodial and proprietary attitudes towards women. An educated and open-minded man can be a better partner for an open-minded and free-spirited woman who believes in the equality of rights and opportunities.

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