Violence Ritualized: The Chemistry of Tradition and Religion in Qaisra Shahraz’s The Holy Woman

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Abstract
This article aims to undertake a study of The Holy Woman by Qaisra Shahraz in terms of how it brings forth the woman question by effectively reflecting on the dangerous chemistry of tradition and religion—a chemistry meant to legitimize ritualization of violence. This naturally entails discussion on the way tradition is made to conspire with religion against women with an exclusive theoretical underpinning of postcolonial feminism. The author has kept the focus of study limited to the issues of female sexuality, celibacy, and hijab. Evidently, the discussion dilates upon how religion is superseded by tradition. This unavoidably causes circumstances culminating in realities that stamp the destitute and dismay of women hailing from the third world postcolonial order.

Keywords
religion, tradition, postcolonialism, the Quran, haqbakhswana, hijab, female sexuality, celibacy, veiling

Introduction
Qaisra Shahraz enjoys a distinct position among contemporary Pakistani authors writing in English. Her concerns are mainly social and not political. Unlike Bapsi Sidhwa (An American Brat, 1993) and Mohammed Hanif (A Case of Exploding Mangoes, 2008), Shahraz is not interested in the ravages of General Zia’s military regime and its tailored Islamization in the late 1980s Pakistan. Similarly, her fiction also stands apart from the ramifications of 9/11 unlike Mohsin’s Hamid’s critique (The Reluctant Fundamentalist, 2007) on the Muslim fundamentalist discourse which predominantly surfaced as an aftermath of the said tragedy. This indeed is something which distinguishes Shahraz’s writings from the mainstream Pakistani fictions written in English which are predominantly political (Siddiqui, 2011). The trajectory of Shahraz’s literary sensibility is overwhelmingly social with an exclusive focus on the woman question as it stands in the postcolonial milieu of rural Pakistan. This explains her interest in the social positioning of Pakistani women especially in relation to practices like enforced marriage and celibacy, violence in marriage, divorce, female sexuality, hijab, inheritance, childbearing, and so on. In the context of Pakistani fiction written in English, Shahraz, like many of her contemporaries, can be categorized as a diasporic writer who displays an increasing sense of postcoloniality featuring the lives of Pakistani masses in general. This explains why her fiction essentially features the dynamics of struggle, identity, representation, and the problems of the indigenous culture as it functions through a post(-)colonial society which is still holding on to the remnants of a by-gone colonialism (Ahmed, 2009).

Shahraz’s texts, especially her novel The Holy Woman (2001), are deeply embedded in the intricacies of tradition, custom, and passion that feature the present-day Pakistan. Her characters apparently deal with situations which are mostly mundane and quite day-to-day. Nevertheless, they eventually embark upon circumstances that bring out queer stories. Shahraz opts for rural settings where lives of people are intense but filled with tradition and humility. With this comes in the problem of tribal tradition which stands in the way of change—a fact not new to Muslim rural culture since the tribal society of 7th-century Arabia too resisted changes that had been brought about by Islam (Haddad & Esposito, 1997). Such a fixation with tradition poses extraordinary challenges to women in rural Pakistan. This explains why the lives of Shahraz’s characters comprise several complexities, thus provoking the readers’ minds. Besides the rural plane, Shahraz’s text also operates at the global level where she depicts Muslims being citizens of a world which is now most

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globalized and urbanized. Human suffering and agony at the hands of a perverted fate is one of her favorite themes. This can be seen in case of Zari Bano, her protagonist in *The Holy Woman*. Shahraz fixes her authorial focus on her country of origin, which is a tradition-bound Muslim society.

Shahraz’s affiliation with “Muslim” feminism has brought her under the spotlight both among her Muslim and non-Muslim readers. It is therefore imperative to critically study her position as a Muslim feminist in a post-9/11 world that has witnessed huge shifts in socio-literary allegiances of Muslim authors, especially the ones with diasporic identities. Ali (2013, p. 201) brings forth the “risk” attached with texts like that of Shahraz as these are based on representational politics using the feminist agenda and reinforce Western hegemonic discourse. This reminds one of the views upheld by Hamid Dabashi (2011) who attaches the term “comprador intellectuals” with the highly feted writers originating from the East but celebrated in the West for their unadulterated show of dissent from within the Muslim world (p. 72). Dabashi is intensely critical of such writers as their literary and intellectual output justifies the demonization and dehumanization of Arab world in particular and Muslim world in general.

Undoubtedly, on a superficial reading, the politics of female representation in Shahraz’s text is sensational. Zari Bano’s destiny associated with *haqakhshwana* (which is today a rare thing happening anywhere in rural Pakistan) has been made so overwhelming that it appears to be the story of every feudal’s daughter in the countryside. This may be extended to Md. Mahmudul Hasan’s (2005) thesis of the orientalization of gender, as he critiques the tendency of characterize the women from the East as backward, domesticized, tradition-bound, ignorant and poor. Such caricaturing was long ago initiated by the West and is now kept in continuum by both the Western and Eastern writers. This homogenization and essentialization of the women of postcolonial nations is what one may regard as part of the orientalization-respect of gender project. It is on account of such notions that one, while reading texts like Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman*, must see whether these establish the authors as native “informants” or “informers.” This is for such writers, as argued by Dabashi (2011), may prove an assistance to the imperialist project in substituting the “black demon with a brown one and a Jew with a Muslim” (p. 36).

It is popularly upheld that many of the writers, especially with diasporic or postcolonial identity, write for the Western audience. This carries the reservation that such works may ascribe normative value to Western standards of looking at and criticizing the non-Western cultures and lifestyles. Shahraz’s cultural narratology in her *The Holy Woman* may be seen in light of her reflection on the Western conception of Muslim cultural identity. Kidwai (2011) however puts forward the idea that *The Holy Woman* can be read in the larger context of globalization and modernity with respect to conventional Muslim rural society of Pakistan. It can be safely argued that the main plot dwelling on Zari Bano’s marriage with the Quran in *The Holy Woman* unavoidably creates sensationalism. Shahraz’s reporting on the cultural realities of rural Pakistan carry an essential resonance of violence, a fact which may endanger her position as a cultural critic. Her plots are featured by melodrama too, something which may arguably posit her as a “native informer.” Men, in Shahraz’s world, both jeopardize women’s destinies (in case of Habib Khan and Siraj Din in *The Holy Woman*) as well as rescue them (in case of Haroon in *Typhoon*). Critically speaking, this further stamps women’s helplessness, making them more subalternized and adding to their othering thus subcribing to the orientalization of gender as discussed by Hasan (2005). Nonetheless, her way of looking at Islam as a remedy to all these and many other socio-domestic problems (as can be seen through her fiction and interviews) is what establishes her as a Muslim feminist who refuses to be part of the contemporary Islamophobia.

A simple subscription to Dabashi’s critique of the role of brown authors as “native informers” essentially carries a question: Just out of the fear of betraying one’s inherited legacy, should one stop speaking the truth? Shahraz’s work may be orientalist in the representation of Pakistani women’s situation in the postcolonial rural context. It exposes the feudal lord acting as a surrogate to the departed colonizer thus becoming the indigenous colonial bourgeois. Moreover, it may be too excessive a portrayal of fatalism on the part of women like Zari Bano who are remarkably urbanized in their approach toward life. Nevertheless, all this is countered and then nullified in the face of Shahraz’s foregrounding of Islam as the ultimate authority in every facet of life among Muslims. To illustrate, Zari Bano, Shahraz’s protagonist in *The Holy Woman*, has been placed at the center of a situation where Islam has been shown misappropriated to the maximum. Certainly, religious values affect cultural beliefs and practices and vice versa as religion is a discursive tradition which is always already relived and embedded in relations of power in the society. Declaring religion key to history, Dawson believes it to be a life-giving force which shapes the dynamism of not only a culture but also determines various social classes that feature a society (Dawson, 2013, p. 38). The problem nevertheless occurs when customary tribal practices are confused with religion (in this case Islam) for appropriating power relations in favor of men. The worst of the worst comes when these tribal or folk practices are legitimized and ritualized in the name of religion. This may in fact be taken as an effort on the author’s part to defend Islam’s position which, in its episteme, is considered misogynist.

This article aims at laying bare the dangerous chemistry of religion and tradition as designed against women in feudal hierarchies in particular and postcolonial rural set ups in general. *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz stands as a representative text in this connection as it highlights the way religion is wrongfully twisted into the melting pot of traditional ritual, something which is bound to serve the androcentric order prevailing in places like rural Pakistan. In this
connection, issues like female sexuality, enforced celibacy and hijab surface through Shahraz’s novel. Nevertheless, what is needed is an endeavor to probe into the kind of space granted by Islam to its female followers, something, which has unfortunately been made to subsume into misogyny.

**Review of Related Literature**

Discourse on gender in Islam is indeed not a new subject. Nonetheless, even an extensive search tells one that it is hard to find literature that exists on gender and Islam in exclusive relation to literature. In the context of Muslim female perspective appearing in literature, Women Claim Islam by Miriam Cooke (2001) is a rare yet seminal contribution. The book revisits literature, fiction and memoirs by contemporary Muslim feminist authors while focusing how these women through their narrative and social activity have challenged their being ruled out of the discourses on religion, war, history, exile and emigration. The book offers the development of a whole episteme of a gendered ideology based on Islam which questions patriarchy and male authority at indigenous levels (in terms of the interpretation of the Islamic doctrine) as well as the biased and colonial narratives about Muslim women. The book serves twofold purposes: It historicizes Islamic feminism and analyzes the fiction and autobiographies of Arab Muslim women writers as different as Nawal El Saadawi and Zaynab al-Ghazali.

Diah Ariani Arimbi’s (2009) Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers looks at the writings of popular Indonesian Muslim women authors in relation to how gender is constructed and in turns determines the roles, status and identity of the Muslim women in the Muslim society of Indonesia. For Arimbi, literary representation in Indonesia has now become one of the many ways through which women carve out their own ways for looking at their own selves. It is thus a medium portraying women’s strategies to take maximum control of their lives and bodies. The book serves a number of purposes: First, it projects how gender-related issues are brought forth in the narratives of contemporary Muslim women writers in Indonesia; second, it shows how Muslim women of Indonesia are shown in these narratives; third, it investigates a variety of aesthetic styles and narrative structures while recognizing how issues of aesthetics are intertwined inseparably with those of gender construction, identity, power, representation, and prevailing religious ideology; and finally, it investigates how these narratives by Indonesian Muslim women authors have sustained, challenged, worked, and reworked the perceptions, roles, and status of women in the Muslim societies.

Such a woman-centric sensibility takes one on a journey to reading Qaisra Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman*. Sana Imtiaz and Shirin Haider (2011) discuss the recolonization of the female mind and body by ritualizing violence. They also address the structure of representation of the female characters in Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman*. To Imtiaz and Haider, the process of making a woman “holy” is part of colonial behavior which involves ritual for legitimizing violence. Ironically, the protagonist Zari Bano in Shahraz’s text materializes her free will and negates androcentricity by accepting confinement and giving up her rights as a woman. Becoming “holy” is synonymous to being devoid of any physical, bodily, or emotional needs. Nevertheless, being a woman adds more to this so-called “holiness” - a fact bound to culminate in the supposed passivity of the female sex. To Imtiaz and Haider, the politics of representation and issue of gender are intertwined thus shaping the spirit of Shahraz’s text.

Discussing Shahraz’s themes and concerns, Sherin Shervani (2011) asserts that Shahraz mainly addresses the issues featuring contemporary society. She is highly conscious of the relation of such issues with the norms of Islam. Shervani appreciates Shahraz’s texts in the sense that they encapsulate the severity and complexity of simple lives of the people in the countryside in Pakistan. However, Shahraz is also interested in the metamorphosis of life and fate which may give out horrific experiences. Shahraz manages to direct her protagonist to an Islamic stance ironically by means of an old feudal norm (marriage with the Quran) which is most un-Islamic in itself. Maintaining the balance between the problems of the present-day world and a Muslim perspective, Shahraz welcomes Islamic values as a remedy to the problems plaguing the contemporary Muslim world today.

Kidwai (2011) establishes that the “newly emerging Muslim woman of our time” is what is most characteristic of Shahraz’s cultural narratology in *The Holy Woman* (p. 85). Shahraz, in a most dexterous manner, makes the old order collapse under its own weight. This naturally helps synchronize the lives and situations of Pakistani women in relation to modernity and globalization. To illustrate, Zari Bano turns her suffering (of being pushed into the role of a holy woman) into an enlightening experience since becoming a holy woman ironically exempts her from the traditional roles (of wife and mother) and gives her liberty to travel and study abroad. It is from her study in Egypt that she learns the reality of Islam in terms of the space it grants to women. What, according to Kidwai, adds more to the place of a Muslim woman in Shahraz’s text is the fact that the women in her world tend to acquire their rightful position while avoiding the “hysterical harangue against the clergy” (p. 81).

Referring to Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman*, Abu Bakar Ali (2013) reminds his readers that Muslim nationalism and its consciousness are remarkably significant for Pakistani females. They aptly respond to the challenges proposed by this religion-based ideology, especially in terms of its implications for the gendered agency. While one talks of popular mass media in Pakistan, ranging from television drama to printed fiction, romance is the pivot of everything. In case of Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman*, however, romance goes even beyond the limits ascribed to it. Today, the genre of romance is providing a platform where Pakistani women writers are codifying and reconfiguring their potential part that they
may play in the nationalist milieu. Shahraz, through her novel, expresses her concerns against the manipulation of these nationalistic and cultural politics which put themselves into practice across the lives and bodies of the women of rural Sindh in Pakistan. The intricacies of religion, gender, culture, and sex (which are inscribed on Zari Bano’s body) can thus be studied well in this regard, especially in unison with the complexities of representation.

Ali Ahmed Kharal (2007) appreciates Shahraz’s art as a novelist as she effectively brings forth her characters to the centre-stage. It is through her female characters that Shahraz speaks for the female sensibility and consciousness of their rights among women. Her women characters assert their will by cutting loose the limitations, which circumscribe the lives of Pakistani women. This acts as a marker of a change for the ill-fated women of rural Pakistan as it allows them at least some breathing space in a social order which is clearly misogynistic.

**Controlled Female Sexuality and the Politics of Misogyny**

Shahraz’s text is essentially a saga of the politics of female sexuality which is manipulated and perpetuated against women’s bodies especially in rural Pakistan. This is done both at familial and public levels as can be seen in Shahraz’s novel where the men surrounding Zari Bano in her family are all inclined to control her sexuality both before and after her marriage with the Quran. The story revolves around the tragedy, which befalls Habib Khan (Zari’s father) and his family when his only son and heir to his estate passes away in an accident. Zari is the eldest of Habib Khan’s three children whose education at university in Karachi has made her bold enough to decide about her marriage independently, though this too turns out to be illusory later. Habib Khan receives a marriage proposal for Zari by young and eligible Sikander who happens to like Zari the moment he sees her. Nevertheless, Zari’s decision to visit and stay at Sikander’s house (with an aim to know him in person before deciding to marry) is no less than a thunderbolt for her aged grandfather Siraj Din (Habib Khan’s father) who considers Zari’s actions abhorring as he pronounces this to Shahzada (Zari’s mother): “Are you telling me, Shahzada, that my young unmarried granddaughter has gone to stay all alone on a strange family’s home and is in the company of a single young man?” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 23). Shahraz depicts the situation of a young daughter in a kind of family where a girl cannot take charge of her will regarding marriage before her elders, especially the male ones. Habib Khan decides to wed Zari with the Quran after the death of Jafar, his only son. He does this following the feudal tradition of “haqabakhshawana” (girls’ marriage with the Quran for withholding land and estate which are considered fundamental for the dignity and socio-economic survival of Pakistani feudal elite). This enables Zari to act as a proxy to Jafar since marrying the Quran means celibacy for the rest of her life. Habib Khan takes the decision in consultation with Siraj Din since the stratagem of the Pakistani feudal families believes in withholding the estate through their male heirs. In absence of a male heir, therefore, the entire estate goes away with girls once they are married (as Islam gives property rights to women). Zari Bano is thus ordained to become “shehzadi ibadat” or a holy woman. Unfortunately, all this is achieved in the name of tradition which, in a most unjust manner, conspires with patriarchy under the shelter of religion. Thus, one sees Zari’s wedding with the Quran as the only “culturally legitimate” way Habib could save his ancestral estate slipping out of his hands. Sikander, on the contrary, is forced by his parents to marry Zari’s younger sister Ruby who is lucky enough not to spend a life of celibacy unlike her elder sister. Sikander unwillingly marries Ruby but develops frustration against Zari for succumbing to the gruesome order of her family.

Zari Bano clearly knows what it means to be a holy woman. She fears a life of celibacy and being a Muslim fully owns her right to get married and that too with her own consent. Habib knows how to repress her voice and restrain her sexuality by putting her down in a most embarrassing manner. The shared values between the father and the daughter make Zari Bano succumb to her father’s order. Being married is a foil for “holiness” and this is what Habib enforces upon his daughter. Zari, on the contrary, launches her humble protest against this:

“I want to be a normal woman, Father, and live a normal life! I want to get married! I am not a very religious person, as you know. I am a twentieth century, modern, educated woman. I am not living in the Mughal period—a pawn in a game of male chess. Don’t you see, Father, I have hardly ever prayed in my life, nor opened the Holy Quran on a regular basis. How can I thus become a Holy Woman? I am not suited to that role. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 62)

And Habib’s pungent response to her appeals goes in these words: “What you are trying to say is that you want a man in your life” (Shahraz, 2001, p. 62). He pressurizes her further by putting her into the same mold of tradition and blood ties which ensnare nearly every Pakistani woman:

“You can shout as much as you like, my proud, beloved daughter, but you will do as I say—I know you will. We are two of a kind. You will never let me down, I know, nor our traditions, nor your grandfather. If you cannot abide by my decision, at least think of your grandfather. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 63)

It is evident that Habib perpetuates his patriarchal and misogynist order on the body, mind, and soul of his daughter. He, on account of his position as a father and authority as a feudal lord, successfully attaches the concept of honor to the dismissal and negation of the bodily side of his daughter’s being. It is Habib’s remark of desiring for a man which compels Zari Bano to give up. He exploits her womanly self by
assaulting her ego. Furthermore, a lot of manipulation is done in the name of religion. As Fatima Mernissi (1987) imparts awareness to her readers about these situations while drawing upon history and concludes that,

Not only the sacred texts have been manipulated, but the manipulation of them is the structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. So all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimized by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions. (p. 9)

Zari Bano’s marriage with the Quran is an idea which finds absolutely no space in Islam. Habib Khan considers the rejection of this tyranny as the betrayal of values and blood. From a structuralist point of view, one feels the compulsion of looking at the word “holy” in terms of its opposite which is “unholy.” From this standpoint, it is the latter of the binary which defines and qualifies the former. It is therefore Habib’s emphasis on a woman’s desire for marriage or man which makes Zari highly conscious of becoming “unholy” in the eyes of her father. And indeed, it is this fear of “unholy” which in turn convinces her to take up the life of a “holy” woman. So, it is the fear of becoming “unholy” in her father’s eyes to which Zari succumbs. Jafar’s (Zari’s brother) death is an irreparable loss to the family. Habib and his father Siraj Din look at the tragedy in terms of the demise of not only their child but also that of their feudal domain. The fear of losing the inheritance by making their daughter marry is an act which is “unholy.” Lands, to the feudal hierarchy, are as sacred as mothers, as it is commonly said and believed among feudal and land owners in Pakistan that, “Selling away one’s lands is tantamount to selling away one’s mother.”

It is again the horror of the “unholy” which makes Zari Bano exercise a strict control over her own sexuality. Her journey to becoming a holy woman can be critically seen in two distinct phases. The first phase entails her struggle against her cotted and emblematic disposition as the most devout woman. This is the period when she strives to reclaim her right to marriage. The latter phase, which develops after her journey and study abroad, brings out the side of her character she herself is never aware of. It is in this phase that Zari Bano confronts and then learns how to control her sexuality. Initially, this control had been something not more than an imposition on her by her father. Later, however, the same control becomes the articulation of her liberty and free will, both as a woman and a scholar of Islam. Zari Bano is driven by this control so much so that she shows reluctance in running a normal matrimonial relation even after her marriage with Sikander. She is afraid of the bodily drives she experiences and so prays to Allah:

Allah pak, please heed the prayers of a weak woman, a sinner. Guide me back on to Your path of peace and religious devotion. Tear out this ugly human emotion that is renting me apart and torturing my soul. Douse this longing, that fire that is engulfing my body. I am supposed to be a pure woman. How can I be that while I harbor such base feelings? Enfold me in Your holy mantle of female modesty. Rid my mind and heart of this man who haunts me at this moment. Show me Your path; for that is the path I seek. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 186)

From a cultural point of view, as Aslam (2005) asserts, lives of women in Pakistan always remain subject to issues of morality and immorality. Thus, Pakistani women fear their own sexuality. They do this to obtain social acceptance, something denied to them if they act otherwise. This is what is evident in Zari Bano’s character also. Her past as a feminist demonstrating resistance to the patriarchal order of her society is altogether a contradiction to what she takes up later in her life—a life of enforced celibacy and religious devotion. Shahraz’s text is in fact defensive in its composition. She is not only vocal about how women’s lives are encroached upon in the name of tradition and religion but also brings into limelight the global perspective upheld about Muslim women in general and those in Pakistan in particular. This is for Muslims, all over the world, believe Islam to be not only a code of faith but also a complete code of life. For Kharal (2007), Shahraz’s text significantly marks the change that has already been there all over the world, that is, the question of women rights and their status. This is achieved effectively by her protagonist by challenging the constraints imposed by gender biases upon a woman’s will and life.

Female Celibacy

*The Holy Woman* presents a certain dialectic process ongoing between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed” (Imtiaz & Haider, 2011). This can be seen in terms of a dialogic relationship between the two where the oppressed is traditionally supposed to be mute or passive. Shahraz, however, develops her characters in a way that the oppressed challenge and question the way they are treated. This is for the binaries of subject and object share each other’s qualities. This encourages the oppressed to hold the oppressor at least ethically accountable for all his wrongdoings. In addition to this, it also creates a kind of hope since the oppressed are somehow in a position to at least question the injustices done to them. This is especially true in the case of women who are canonically believed to be doubly disadvantaged.

Kristen Holst and Ana Rutherford (1986) use the term “double colonization” while referring to the destiny of women who simultaneously undergo the tyranny inflicted by the colonizer and patriarchy. There is an entire series of male-oriented myths which, according to Holst and Rutherford, are celebrated by colonialism. These include missionaries, marriage, freedom fighters, and so on. This establishes the fact that women are twice enslaved as long as the colonizer sustains who even perpetuates the tyranny by transferring his powers to the indigenous patriarchal order. Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?* provoked a massive response which Spivak (1996) discusses in *The Spivak Reader*. The
word “speak,” as used in her essay, has been commonly mis-understood. Spivak suggests that the usage of the word does not imply that women never actually talked. What Spivak tends to highlight is the failure of their words to conduct “transaction” between the speaker and the listener.

Now when it comes to the relationship between gender and subalternity, one of the constructs in operation has been religion. Religion is one of the constituents subsumed by culture as a macroscopic entity. Whereas religion draws its energy from culture and vice versa, gender is dependent on both culture and religion. While qualifying culture, Kuper (1999) takes it as “a way of talking about collective identities” (p. 3). Culture primarily owes to what is indigenously sound and credible and the way people are organized. It is generally believed by the post-modernists that gender is the product of the normative behavior demonstrated toward men and women by culture and religion.

The history of religion (especially the monolithic religion) and the traditional culture gives out stories of subordination of women to men. Traditional and religious practices are academically separable though they do interact and overlap each other invariably. This is what occurs in Shahrrez’s text where misogyny and patriarchy, especially in rural Pakistan, are legitimized in the name of tradition and religion.

The tradition of “haqbakhshawana” is what Zari Bano’s life orbits around. This entails the authority demonstrated by the feudal class over their daughters and other women of family to keep the feudal legacy preserved within the family, especially in case of the absence of a male heir. This is how Habib Khan justifies his wrongdoings he intends to commit against his own daughter in the name of tradition.

Well, now that I have no son, who is going to be my heir, Shahzada? To whom am I going to bequeath all this land? I am not going to hand it over to some stranger who just happens to marry my daughter. This is our land, accumulated and paid for by the sweat and toil of my forefathers, down the centuries by different generations. Tell me what would you do in my position? (Shahrrez, 2001, p. 47)

Sikander, in the course of his argument with Zari Bano, tends to explain this injustice. The same religion which is exploited to tyrannize women in fact gives them the right to live and choose. Sikander’s words actually hold a mirror to the tradition-bound Pakistani society. He places the man-made culture in opposition to the revealed word, thus exposing the horrors of the former:

Holy Quran! What nonsense is this? No woman is to be denied her natural role as a wife and a mother. Who has invented these traditions? Have they studied the Holy Quran, where it categorically states that widows and divorcees should be encouraged to remarry at the first opportunity? So how can a beautiful young maiden be deliberately denied marriage? (The Holy Woman, p. 89)

Ironically, Zari Bano is fully conscious of the rights given to her by Islam as a woman. Yet, what seems to be more important is to abide by all that has been decided by the males of her family. Even in her freedom, Zari Bano experiences subjugation as she cannot succumb to the idea of the denial of her right to marry. Zari refers to the “pinjra” (cage) in which all women are destined to live. The key of this cage stays in the hands of fathers or other male members of the family. Zari’s pain aggravates as she is fully aware of the rights her religion has given to her. This creates irony as Zari Bano, who herself is denied the fundamental rights by her family, explains what position Islam reserves for women. Zari Bano’s identity as a holy woman, when seen as a subject-constitutive reality, brings out a number of facts that feature the complex hermeneutics of religion in relation with identity, space and sexuality of the female. It is her father who ascribes the status of holy woman to her. Zari Bano is thereof exposed to a situation where her elevation accounts for her subjugation. This dichotomy subverts the subject position Zari Bano proclaims in general. Habib, her father, articulates the expected outcomes of her so-called sacred position where one finds ritual in conspiracy with tradition and a society which is both complex and hypocritical. Michel Focault’s famous proposition that knowledge is a product of power fits right into this situation. Pakistani women are hardly aware of what rights they enjoy being Muslim women. This particularly owes to our passivity as women never try to acquire any knowledge of Sharia (Islamic law). However, it also alludes to the role of Pakistani males, especially the scholars on religion, who never let the body of knowledge out which favors women.

Veil: A Mechanism of Serving or Dismantling Patriarchy

Mookherjee (2005), on the issue of hijab and veiling, holds the view that it involves certain controversy as it deals with two problems of distinct nature. The issue arises from both feminist and postcolonial camps, respectively. As for the feminist standpoint, women and young girls, in no way, must be forced to conform to any community’s religious or conventional norms. In terms of a postcolonial perspective, however, the increasing focus on hijab is a matter of establishing biases against Muslim value systems. Mookherjee further refers to Elizabeth Badinter’s (1989) universal feminist concern about the possibilities of female subjugation within the cultural communities. In her debate over the headscarf issue of the young girls in France, she holds the view that the choice of adopting veil is synonymous to giving up one’s individual and personal autonomy. She asserts that even if the Muslim girls take veiling as an expression of their autonomy, they are abiding by the Muslim values of female restraint, confinement and modesty. Badinter however fails to penetrate the spirit and episteme leading the Muslim women to cover their heads and bodies. Mojab (2001) discusses the policing of women’s bodies as a prominent site of debate for both feminism and postcolonial-sim. The idea of liberal recognition, favorite with the Western
discourses is problematic when put under the postcolonial lens as, “... it often presumes a stable world of public meanings and symbols. It relies on a settled public private distinction which frequently fails to engage with the third world women’s struggle for emancipation” (Mookherjee, 2005, p. 2). Mojab (2001) quotes Hoodfar (1994) who presents a relativist view on the veiling of Muslim women:

The veil, which since the nineteenth century has symbolized for the West the inferiority of Muslim cultures, remains a powerful symbol both for the West and for Muslim societies... Veiling is a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings. While it has clearly been a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling women’s lives, women have used the same social institution to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy. (p. 5)

For Zari Bano and her status as a holy woman, veil serves multiple purposes. To illustrate, her marriage ceremony calls for the bride to dress up with splendor and then cover this splendor with veil. This carries a certain symbolism suggesting the split of personality and the role Zari Bano is put into. She surrenders her womanhood and even matrimony by getting married to the Quran. Zari Bano, in her exasperation, cuts the locks of her hair which is a declaration of her readiness to be a combatant in the politics of power and changing of roles. However, she shifts back to her female self (something she has never been able to give up completely) at the wedding ceremony of her sister Ruby where she dances with other girls while going against her role of a holy woman. Zari Bano’s identity is thus fluid and remains in constant flux.

Zari Bano once again falls prey to the schism of her personality after her marriage with Sikander. She is indecisive about what to wear as it becomes difficult for her to cope with “marriage.” She does not know whether she should wear dull colors as she used to 5 years ago or the pastel shades when now she is married:

Until now, I have gone everywhere in my burqa; now I am requested to discard it at home. I am so used to the burqa, feel so totally happy and safe behind it, Mother that without it I feel naked and disoriented, very conscious of my body and its shape. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 347)

Zari Bano successfully recodes veil as a means of transcendence from the spatial boundary it conceptually and traditionally connotes for women. Ali (2013) lays stress on the need to look whether Shahraz’s text “[A]cts as a spring board for a visible (re) configuration” (p. 197). As a matter of fact, it is the “veiled” persona of Zari Bano which “enlightens” her so much so that she dares to interrogate her formerly “liberal” position. Her veil essentially challenges her vanity she carried with her and which was no more than a site serving the sexually charged gaze of the males in her society. Unfortunately, however, Zari’s new role also serves the same patriarchy, which she willfully negates by shunning her vanity. Her shrouded appearance materializes the socio-capitalist motivations of her father Habib Khan which are tactfully given the garb of religion. Therefore, “The role Zari Bano now occupies is one that is consciously aware of the preconditions of its feudal existence, where myth cannot transcend its own materiality” (Ali, 2013, p. 198). With her veiled identity, Zari happens to visit Egypt, England and the Far East as a student and an ambassador of religion. It is thus interesting to note here how the capitalistic and feudal motives get turned on their own heads and impart Zari the same authority which had been denied to her. She comes to embrace and internalize her veiled identity as a religiously rooted opportunity. This gives a political nuance to her position as a holy woman which, at the same time, also empowers her. Patriarchy thus comes to betray itself as Zari Bano triumphantly closes the circle of misogyny. And so the readers see how the same patriarchy, compelling Zari dump her essential female sexuality, betrays itself as she refuses to marry Sikander (for the sake of Ruby’s young son after her death) on account of being a “holy woman.” Even later, when she concedes to her elders’ requests to marry Sikander, she agrees thoroughly on her own terms. Subscribing to her position as a veiled priestess, Zari first gives up her body and sexuality and reclaims it later. Sikander is denied any sexual access (which every man considers his foremost right) for a considerably long time after his marriage with Zari Bano. In fact to Zari Bano, hijab blesses her with a sense of self-worth, dignity and respect. She dauntlessly criticizes the West for its critique on hijab:

The veil has always perplexed and tantalized the Western world, both men and women alike. It is a disconcerting phenomenon for them as much now as it ever was. Westerners have always misunderstood the reason why women wear it. To add insult to injury, they see it as a symbol of male oppression—a widely accepted stereotyped myth. They think that women are forced to wear it by their menfolk. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 220)

**Conclusion**

Shahraz’s narrative reflects on the dangerous chemistry of religion and tribal tradition especially when it is manipulated against women. It also proposes balance and understanding between Islam and the modern, day-to-day realities of human life, especially that of Muslim women. The orientalist biases established against Islam as a religion and Muslims as a people can be countered only if the scholarship on Islam is just and unprejudiced. Muslim women, from across the globe, form an unavoidable part of this polemics. This implicitly emphasizes that they must equip themselves with the stance upheld by Sharia; as Islam does not comprise only a set of rituals to be followed; it rather establishes itself as a complete code of life where there are clear-cut specifications of what status each of the two sexes enjoys, respectively, in terms of social position and interpersonal relationships. Shahraz’s cultural critique on the rural Sindh in Pakistan essentially brings the woman question and female space as it
exists in an unbreakable relation with the looming postcoloniality. Her female characters like Zari Bano are the conspicuous reminders of how women can be the combatants for their own rights and learn to survive both within the tribal or indigenous order and the global plane they are part of. The relation between tradition and religion, especially when placed within the postcolonial order, gives out circumstances which are generally designed against women thus naturally favoring men. The need therefore is to reconsider and revisit the relation that exists between the tribal and the religious. This is what is likely to guarantee some breathing space for women like Zari Bano who experience intense suffocation when violence or tyranny is ritualized in the name of religion in places like rural Pakistan.

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Note
1. Haqakhbshawana is the tradition, coming specially from rural Sindh in Pakistan, which makes girls give up their right of inheritance in property and pushes them into a life of celibacy by having them get married to the Quran.

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