

Treatment of Women in Pakistani Short Stories: A Case Study of "The Breast" and "The Wedding of Sundri"

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze two of the Pakistani short stories written in English by female authors. The focus of this paper is to trace the suppression of females that can be direct or indirect suppression. The suppression that females usually face is mostly associated with men trying to establish and exercise their power and authority over females. This article tries to establish the fact that suppression and discrimination or subjugation faced by the females is not just at the hands of males but other females as well. The short stories selected for this study are "The Breast" and "The Wedding of Sundri" by Soniah Kamal and Bina Shah respectively. The methodology adopted for this study is textual analysis. Soniah Kamal's story takes place in an unnamed community but because of the terminologies used the story can be easily believed to be set in some part of rural Pakistan. The other story by Bina Shah is set in rural part of Sindh and some under-developed region of Sindh. On one hand, women claim that they are being suppressed and oppressed by men but these two stories prove that females are just as much responsible for female subjugation as the males in some society.

Keywords: women, suppression, society, honor killing, mutilation, compensation.

Muslim women gained rights and respect with the advent of Islam as long as early seventh century. Islam gave women not only the right to live but made them a symbol of blessing. The status of women was raised from that of something less than humans to someone who should be respected and obeyed. The western women gained their rights as late as nineteenth and early twentieth century. That too was only after many movements and protests being held by women. The western women gave their movement the name of feminism and demanded rights for themselves against the discrimination they faced not only in homes but at work places as well.

The twenty-first century woman has more rights and power than men in some of the countries while in other countries; women are still struggling to survive. The Indian sub-continent, before its partition in 1947, was one of the largest cultural hubs not only in Asia but in the entire world. Although Islam is one of the major religions prevailing through this

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area, women in this region still face many difficulties in their routine life. Before Islam, Hinduism was the major religion and one of its practices includes not just discrimination on the basis of caste but also on gender. Majority of the women in this region face not just difficulty while living as a female but also as a mother especially if they are the mother of a girl. Females are often treated as objects and honor of the entire family is associated with them due to which, honor killing, child marriages and to give away girls as a compensation for some crime or debt is a very common practice.

If a woman from an Asian society is declared as prostitute or not a virgin before the marriage then she is associated with all kinds of bad deeds and evil. Killing of such women is not something that is questioned or looked down upon. If killing is not the punishment handed out to females who have been labeled as sinners then isolation and alienation in the family, in the entire society is the other punishment. Sometimes the punishment can include mutilation of body parts to mark the females as sinners and outcasts. Such practices are more common in the under-developed and conservative parts of many different countries. Pakistan is one such country where such practices prevail more strongly in the deeper and interior parts of the country.

Short stories are that part of literature that make use of fantastical events to reveal the prevailing practices in the area that the author has either visited or lived in. though it is a very high possibility that the story might be too much of an exaggeration or too far-fetched but sometimes the stories that appear to be most fantastical happen to be an image from the real life practices.

This paper tries to highlight the ways in which Pakistani women depicted in the short stories, are not just suppressed by the male-dominating society prevailing the country but also the oppression and injustice women have to face at the hands of other women in their society. The selected short stories, "The Breast" and "The Wedding of Sundri", both represent the low status that women have in the interior and the conservative parts of Pakistan where much of the culture is influenced by the centuries of shared Hindu-culture that prevailed in the Indian-subcontinent before the partition.

In an article, "The Nature and Causes of Female Suppression", two researchers, Abigail J. Stewart and David G. Winter, found that before the last hundred years or so, female suppression has always been explained with reference to "divine will or natural law". They also claim that women used to have equal rights to men but these were snatched away because of economic structures growing weak with property and other belongings of the females going in the family of the husband after marriage. This paper negates the idea given by Stewart and Winter while trying to establish that women suppression cannot be removed from the society because it is often more supported by the females themselves.

This paper also adds to Sana Nasir's article, "Indigenous Roots of Gender Oppression & Discrimination in Subcontinent of India", in which factors for discrimination have been discussed. In her article, Nasir questions whether the gender discrimination observed in the Indian subcontinent a dilemma take has emerged as a consequence of the modern era or is it something that the people of subcontinent have inherited from their forefathers.

A Pakistani movie, "Bol", also took up the issue of female oppression and the domestic concerns of many people living in the country. Gaurav Malani while writing a review of the movie for the newspaper, The Times of India, explained how female oppression is an issue

that prevails not only in Pakistan but in India as well. Malani also believes that the movie, Bol, "highlights the regressive attitude of a male-dominated society that offers no liberty to woman in choosing life-partner, refusing reproduction, gaining education or working independently." This paper will further support the idea presented in this movie and this review by exploring the different ways in which females are suppressed in their homes.

Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson in their article, "Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities: "Doing" Gender across Cultural Worlds" tried to explain that racial and gender discriminations are social arrangements that prevail in this world. Pyke and Johnson explained that the oppression in "a social constructionist framework" is an attempt to demolish the historical crown of power and domination through replacing it by privileging "gender over race and class". (Pyke and Johnson 33-53)

In Barbara D. Miller's book, *Sex and Gender Hierarchies*, Gerald D. Berreman has written a chapter titled Sanskritization as Female Oppression in India. In that chapter, Berreman has explained how India is nation that is "dominated by the social organization, culture, and ideology of its Hindu majority." In this chapter, the central idea that is explained by Berreman is that females are allocated lower position than males because of their religious ideology and this principle is also practiced by the Muslim population of that country. This paper tries to distinguish the idea that female oppression is a religious idea and tries to trace its origin to social practices.

Although female English writers are few and most not very famous in Pakistan but a woman named Rakhshanda Jalil has managed to compile and edit a book contain thirteen short stories by different female authors. The book containing many original and some translated stories has been published in India, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Canada, United States of America and Australia but is also available in Pakistan and a few other countries. The book has been once shortlisted for The Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008. In the introduction of the book, Jalil has in the introduction of the book stated that, "In Pakistan, women who write in English are often charged with writing for a small incestuous group that is far removed from the 'real' Pakistan." (Jalil) In this book, Jalil has also stated her prime concern was, "...to present as complete a picture of the everydayness of life as it is lived and experienced by Pakistani women." (Jalil)

The short story, "The Breast", is a first person narrative about the misery and torturous feelings of a mother whose new born baby has been taken away and buried alive because the child is a girl and the mother tried to breast feed a stranger's child so now she is about to face the punishment of mutilation of her breast. The breast is defined by Laura Hamilton as a symbol of femininity, motherhood, nurturing and sustaining life but in this story, the very first line defines breast as "a gigantic wad of fat... seven pounds of shapeless fat" (Kamal). It has been portrayed in the story as a burden, a very heavy responsibility that has lost all its purpose and meaning for the narrator.

The story talks about a society that must conform to "tribunal rule" which is made up of men whose orders must be obeyed at all costs in that part of the society. According to their rules, someone who is proved to be liar by anyone must have their tongue cut off even if in real that person has never uttered a single lie. Another rule is cutting of right hand on the first act of robbery if found and only certain conditions in which baby girls are allowed to live. The logic that is followed by this tribunal rule is that "one is rendered innocent after suffering

punishment." (Kamal)

The society portrayed in this short story is a male dominant one where females must never utter a single word if they see a man committing murder or they will be accused as liars. The role assigned to females is only of mothers or betrothed of a male in that village or the next. In such a society, having a baby boy means to hold a strong position in the society while baby girls are only allowed to live in case they are a twin to a boy or the village has a boy who has not found a girl to marry in the future. Boys are given a very high status that is a "Life Giver" and the power and honor that is attached with giving birth to a boy are so great that the mothers unconsciously suppress even the idea of having a baby girl in their womb. This is accompanied by underlying fear of having a baby girl which then nurtures and strengthens the carvings and ideas associated with having a baby boy in their bellies.

In the story, "The Breast", women do not help each other. Even a mother does not help her daughter. When the narrator is about to be punished, her mother, Aji keeps on saying the same thing to her, "You deserve it. You brought it upon yourself." (Kamal) This shows how the extreme marginalizing of women by males has corrupted the minds of the females as well who have now begun to discriminate other women as well. The narrator tells how she herself has been a mid-wife and has given countless number of baby-girls to the tribunal to be killed without even feeling any kind of emotion. The narrator explained how she would feel when handing over new born daughters of others using the words, "I did not flinch, my heart would beat steadily" (Kamal). These words, again displays the cruel upbringing of the females in a male-society where women have all but forgotten to treat other women as humans or their equals.

The female discrimination is even more prominent in the story when the narrator's punishment has been decided and it is a tribunal rule that once the punishment is complete, the person is free of their sin. The narrator is given the punishment of having one of her breasts chopped off for feeding a stranger's child, which has also been reported to the tribunal by a female, her own mother. Aji, thinks that the punishment ordered by the tribunal is not enough and shouts that, "She's not innocent by any standards. Not with a lop-sided chest proclaiming otherwise to the world." (Kamal) The husband also wants to end her marriage with the narrator once her punishment is completed. The women are facing more extreme punishments and discrimination because no one stands up for another especially for a female. The mothers are more devoted to the tribunal rules than to their children or any other female relation that they might have of their own. Women who give birth to daughters have no respect or value in the eyes of the men as well as other women.

The other crime of the narrator was that she failed to tell the tribunal to take her daughter and bury her. On the contrary, she tried to save the life of her new-born even though from the very start of the pregnancy, the narrator has been dead sure that the child in her womb is a boy. She was so sure of it that she laughed in men's face and ignored Zore who said he would help her by impregnating his wife just in case. The narrator claimed that she experienced all those feelings and carvings that are associated with baby boys but in the end she is forced to think whether her food carvings natural or a result of some underlying fear that her child might be a girl and to repress that fear, her mind nurtured her carvings. Even the thought of having a baby girl is something that is feared and unacceptable even by the women, which shows how women in tribal areas often face double suppression and marginalization.

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The second short story, "The Wedding of Sundri", by Bina Shah, displays a similar theme and society in which girls are a burden and women suppress or trouble the life of other women in a male-dominating society. The story is set in the interior Sindh where girls are considered burden and the parents are always in a hurry to marry off their daughters as soon as they can find a man for her. The daughters in that society are married off as soon as they enter adolescence. Sundri is engaged to a distant relative at the age of seven while her fiancé was eleven years her senior. The marriage date is set to be when Sundri comes of age and one month after that, she is married off at the age of twelve. The daughter in this story is treated as an inanimate object with no feelings or thoughts of her own. She is simply a burden that the parents must get rid of, she is the honor of the man she is married off to and if she does not give birth to sons then she has no right to be happy or in extreme cases to remain married. "And as long as she bears him sons, he will be happy with her". (Shah)

The society and culture portrayed in this story is one that does not allow women to eat before the men in the family, husband and son or sons, has eaten or visit others in their homes when the men were not at home. This is evident through the dialogues of Abdul Karim, Sundri's elder brother who objects to the liberties his father has given to his mother. "Baba, this isn't proper. It's not the way for women to behave. You must tell her. It's a matter of honour, the family's honour." (Shah) The girls, as explained in the story, are not given any kind of education or training for any job except for household work therefore it is believed that it is better to marry girls off because, women working outside of their home, is something that goes against the cultural norms of the Sindhi society.

The practices of this society portray the patriarchal imposition and role assigned to women. The suppression and oppression of women lead to their shadowy and limited life. Seeing the life of cities and hustle bustle on roads is the only amusement for them. Their lives are bound to work and producing children for society. Moreover they are tied to any unknown men when they are not even able to feel difference between a boy and a girl.

The wedding gift for the twelve years old girl is an extra half an hour of sleep on the day of her marriage which shows how females are treated in their families. To educate a girl even about her body or what she will have to experience after her marriage is considered shameful and useless talk. When Sundri experiences her menstrual cycle for the first time, she is extremely frightened and does not know what is happening to her but her mother never explained to her before and even then she simply gives Sundri some rags and tells her to take care of it herself. The marriage is also something that is decided by the men in the family, the females have no say in it especially Sundri who does not even know the meaning of marriage.

The culture depicted in this story is one in which women must and only do what the men of their family tell them to. The women are forbidden to think on their own and must only rely on their husband or son for anything and everything. The girls in such a society are raised in a manner to never question anything that is happening to them or around them. Sundri simply gets married when her father decides. She is told to remain silent when her uncles come to her. "They asked her three times whether she agreed to the marriage, but of course she was not expected to reply. It was all over in seconds." (Shah)

The females, in such a society, have no right to wish for anything but their enthusiasm in marriage is still firm even if they are been beaten everyday by their husbands. "This was Sebhagi's sister, whose husband beat her often". This gives a vivid picture of brutality of

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patriarchy in these remote areas treating women as their slave. In the Nikkah even they are symbolically asked for their agreement but are not allowed to express their own wish as an exposition of hypocrisy of patriarchy even in the religious teachings. A bride in such circumstances is tied to pain and sufferings as a forecast. After the marriage, the girls are not allowed to come back to their parents except as a dead body and that too, only in case of a normal death.

Shah, through the character of Banoo, shows the way women have accepted this oppression and role assigned by society. "You will have to bear your pain from now on..." Sundri was a wait fallen off the shoulders of Mohammad Karim and not a child, not his blood and flesh, not his daughter. The last advice typifies the acceptance of character and duties by women as a mother. She advises her to obey all in laws and produce them sons as this would lead her to get position over there otherwise she would suffer alienation. The double standard of society is mocked by the author, which expect woman as an important commodity for pleasure but should only produce sons in order to make the family strong.

In the end of the story, Sundri is killed as a conviction of Kari which means to be a girl who has bad manners and have been exploited by boys or men. She is blamed as an immoral, dishonorable woman who stayed in companionship with boys in the playgrounds as a child, "She would laugh in front of them and walk in front of them and make them go mad with lust for her. This was too great an insult for my uncle's family to bear." (Shah) Such an accusation was made by Banoo on Sundri in order to get one of her own five daughters to be married. This action of Banoo shows how women, in a male dominating society, behave in order to gain respect and ease their own problems.

Banoo is jealous of Sundri getting married while she is a widow with five unmarried daughters of her own. Banoo promises her own daughter to be married to Ghulam Farid, Sundri's husband, in exchange for Sundri's death. In the Sindhi society, women who are accused as Kari are not allowed to live, their punishment is death only regardless of the fact whether the accusation was true or not. Even when it is revealed that the accusation was only a foul play of Banoo in order to lighten her own burden, no action is taken against her. The story simply ends on a note of no funeral or tombstone for the ones who are declared as Kari. Both these stories show exploitation of women at the hands of other women living together with them in the same society. The analysis shows that in extreme male-dominated and conservative societies, women start to act and behave in a manner in which females suppress, exploit and play with the lives of other women while only caring about themselves. The grief or loss of one woman at the hand of another is something that no one even blinks an eye on which easily shows how deeply the males have exploited and twisted the minds of women while caging women in a narrow structure of do's and don'ts.

Since ancient times, men have treated women as lower and weaker beings all over the world. In some countries, this notion led to killing and murders of baby girls upon death and severe punishment were given to women who gave birth to a girl. For years, to have baby girl was taken as an insult and many women faced divorce or alienation in their families or societies for being the mother of a girl. Boys, on the other hand, have been treated as pride and hope for the family. This concept has penetrated so much in the minds of the people that even after so much development and changes all over the world have failed to make people understand that girls are humans with feelings and emotions as well. This concept is still very much

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evident in even developed nations of the world but is particularly prominent in underdeveloped and developing countries.

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