

NEGOTIATING GENDER AND IDENTITY: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF AHMAD'S *THE GATEKEEPER'S WIFE*

Muhammad Nasir

Lecturer in English University of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan

legendguy143@yahoo.com

Muhammad Maroof Shah

Govt. Elementary School Teacher Mian Channu, Pakistan

Sadaf Bashir

Govt. Elementary School Teacher Mian Channu, Pakistan

Ayesha

M.phil Scholar University of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan

Abstract

*The present research study aims at exploring the postcolonial feminist themes in Rukhsana Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife*, focusing on the intersectionality of gender, identity, and cultural oppression in postcolonial Pakistan. By analyzing Ahmad's portrayal of female characters, the study investigates how societal expectations, colonial legacies, and patriarchal norms shape women's experiences, particularly within the institution of marriage. Through a close reading and text-based analysis, the research seeks to uncover the challenges these women face in reconciling their traditional roles with modern aspirations. The study also examines how Ahmad's narratives provide a critical lens on women's emotional resilience, empowerment, and their continuous struggle for agency within oppressive socio-cultural frameworks. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on postcolonial feminist literature by offering insights into the complex dynamics of gender and identity in a postcolonial context. Furthermore, it underscores the potential of literature as a tool for raising awareness of women's issues and advocating for societal transformation in Pakistan.*

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Gender, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Identity, Resilience.

1. Introduction

In this research study, the researchers have conducted a postcolonial feminist analysis of Rukhsana Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014), focusing on the complex intersections of gender, identity, and cultural oppression within postcolonial Pakistan. Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014), offers a profound exploration of the emotional and psychological struggles faced by women navigating the challenging terrain between tradition and modernity. Through her compelling character portrayals, Ahmad illustrates the internal conflict women experience as they are caught between societal expectations, familial obligations, and personal aspirations. The researcher examined these characters' journeys, which highlighted their resilience, agency, and emotional experiences shaped by the broader socio-cultural forces at play in a postcolonial society. The researchers have applied a postcolonial feminist framework to critically analyze how these women responded to the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy, which continued to influence their lives long after colonial rule had ended. Ahmad's narrative style, which combines cultural insight with emotional depth, provided a unique lens through which to understand the impact of colonialism and patriarchy on the personal identities and emotional lives of women.



1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study explores the complex issues faced by female characters particularly, women grapple with their identities and roles in a rapidly changing cultural and social landscape. These characters often find themselves caught between traditional values and the pressures of modern societal norms. Many of the women depicted in these stories experience internal conflicts as they try to reconcile their upbringing with their current realities, particularly when navigating unfamiliar environments and the expectations placed upon them. Their struggles to adapt to new surroundings, coupled with societal pressures, often result in emotional turmoil and identity crises. This research seeks to delve into the ways these women navigate the contradictory forces at play in their lives, examining how their experiences reflect broader themes of gender, cultural identity, and the negotiation of agency within a postcolonial context.

1.2 Significance of the study

This research study is significant because it offers a deeper understanding of the intersection of gender, culture, and identity through a postcolonial feminist lens, specifically within the context of Rukhsana Ahmad's short stories. By focusing on the emotional and psychological challenges faced by women in postcolonial societies, the study sheds light on how cultural expectations and societal pressures shape the lives of women. It contributes to the academic discourse on gender studies, postcolonial literature, and feminist theory by exploring how women navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, identity and dislocation, and agency and oppression. Furthermore, the study fills a gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014), which portrays the complexities of women's experiences in Pakistan, particularly those who migrate due to marriage. These women often grapple with identity crises and emotional struggles as they try to adapt to new cultural norms. By examining these narratives, the research highlights the broader implications for understanding the resilience, empowerment, and personal growth of women in such contexts. The findings of this not only deepen our understanding of the challenges women face in postcolonial societies but also demonstrate how literature serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and advocating for social change. This research provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of women, contributing to ongoing conversations about gender, identity, and cultural oppression in contemporary South Asian literature.

2. Literature Review

Pakistani English literature has evolved into an important part of the global literary landscape. Ahmad's works contribute to this growing body of literature, focusing on the complexities of identity, displacement, and the search for empowerment in a postcolonial world. The exploration of gender roles, cultural identity, and the aftermath of colonialism is central to this tradition. Writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie have similarly explored the effects of colonialism on national identity and the role of women in postcolonial South Asia (Sidhwa, 1989; Shamsie, 2003). Ahmad's stories resonate with these themes, offering a nuanced perspective on how women navigate the intersections of colonial history, cultural identity, and gender oppression.

Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) delves into the emotional and psychological struggles of women like Annette, who, as a British expatriate in Pakistan, grapples with her identity in a foreign cultural context. Annette's experience of navigating a new cultural environment speaks



to the broader themes of hybridity and identity crises in postcolonial societies. The concept of hybridity, as explored by theorists like Homi K. Bhabha (2019), is particularly relevant here, as Ahmad's characters, like Annette, attempt to negotiate their cultural identities in the context of conflicting colonial and postcolonial norms. In the realm of postcolonial feminist theory, intersectionality is a central framework for understanding how different forms of oppression intersect and compound women's experiences in postcolonial societies. Intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2021), provides a lens through which to analyze how gender, race, and class intersect to shape the experiences of women in Ahmad's work. Annette's struggles in Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) highlights how her gender, race, and cultural displacement compound her feelings of alienation and marginalization, thus offering a rich analysis of the intersectional nature of oppression. Similarly, other characters like Zarina and Mumtaz in *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon* face multifaceted forms of marginalization that underscore the complexity of their resistance and agency (Ahmad, 2021).

Ahmad's portrayal of gender oppression is central to her work, focusing on how patriarchal structures and colonial legacies continue to impact women's lives in postcolonial societies. As postcolonial feminist scholars argue, the continued influence of colonial power structures has a lasting effect on gender dynamics, reinforcing patriarchal norms that limit women's autonomy (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1988). Ahmad's characters, such as Annette and Zarina, struggle to assert their agency within these oppressive systems, offering a powerful critique of the colonial and patriarchal forces that continue to shape women's lives. The effects of colonialism on women's social roles and identities have been widely discussed in postcolonial feminist literature. The imposition of Western norms and values during colonial rule disrupted traditional social structures, leading to a lasting impact on gender roles in postcolonial societies. Ahmad's work engages with this theme, examining how colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of women in South Asia. The colonial disruptions to social and gender norms are particularly evident in Ahmad's characters, who must navigate both the remnants of colonialism and the patriarchy that defines their postcolonial identities (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1984).

Ahmad's exploration of agency and resistance is a key aspect of her work. Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the capacity of women to resist and transform oppressive systems. In Ahmad's stories, characters like Mumtaz and Zarina demonstrate that resistance can take many forms, from subtle acts of defiance to overt challenges to societal norms. This aligns with the feminist critique of Western notions of passive victimhood, as highlighted by theorists like Mohanty (1984) and Anzaldúa & Moraga (2022), who argue for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to understanding women's resistance in postcolonial societies.

2.1 Main Tenets of Postcolonial Feminism

2.1.1 Critiquing Universal Feminism and Western Hegemony:

Postcolonial feminism opposes the universal idea of western feminist experience and theories which are applicable to women in different cultural contexts both historical and today. It questions the notion of a single, monolithic "womanhood" by pointing out that there are many different kinds of women throughout the world. It further interrogates the hegemony of western feminist discourses, and their capacity to centre women in (and from) The Global South ineffectively or inaccurately. (Mohanty, 1984) discusses the homogenizing of women from the global South by



Western feminist research. The Western gender system is not the universal model for construing dissimilarities among males and females, according (*Oyěwùmí, 1997*) which suggests that this category does not prevail in pre-colonial Yoruba culture. Annette in *The Gatekeeper's Wife* shows struggles of a Western woman that could not be translated on the perspective – as if it was universal feminist. They made apparent the cultural and social underpinnings that factored into women experiences in different environments.

Postcolonial feminism is the application of Postcolonial theory to address and articulate more specifically gender and sexuality from a perspective sensitive not only towards intersectional marginalization but also around forms of resistance created in post-colonial worlds. This includes looking at the ways colonial powers imposed Western norms and values, disrupted traditional social structures and contributed to further marginalizing women. It follows this by addressing the continued effect of colonialist policies on women and shows how neocolonialism aids in continuing gender inequality. (Chakravorty Spivak, 1988) in his immensely influential essay on third world feminism poses questions about both the visibility and agency of marginalized women in postcolonial discourse with regard to colonial power structures. Ahmad often talks about characters grappling with the messy aftermath of colonialism. In the story, we can read Zarina's family as keeping to the old ways in direct opposition to a colonial present.

Postcolonial feminism advocates the decolonization of knowledge production and argues that gender studies must pay greater attention to what is a visible case in ethnicity as well: it reflects Eurocentric perspective with Global South sources concepts generated by Western scholarship dominating. It challenges, expands and extends hegemonic Western knowledge systems through the recognition and validation of indigenous knowledge(s) as well as other ways of knowing. (Smith, 2012) remains central to discussions of decolonization in relation to research and knowledge production within indigenous contexts. (Ong, 1999) has a similar position; she locates migrants and diasporic communities in the interstitial where her *Flexible Citizenship* moves to negotiate between global capital flows which flow down through them, and cultural stories that try to regulate or capture those migrations. Her writing is a form of knowledge production, part and parcel with decolonizing. *Fleeting Statements* focuses on issues of gender, culture and identity in a postcolonial world through countering Western stereotypes with alternative perspectives based around experiences of South Asian women.

2.2 Previous Research on Postcolonial Feminism

Previous research in postcolonial feminism has extensively examined the intersections of race, gender, and colonial history, exploring how these factors shape the identities and lived experiences of women in postcolonial societies. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) have critically analyzed Western feminist discourses for their tendency to generalize women's experiences across the globe, often overlooking the unique struggles faced by women in the Global South. Postcolonial feminism, as a theoretical framework, challenges these generalized narratives by calling for a more nuanced, localized understanding of gender oppression, one that is sensitive to the specific historical, social, and cultural contexts in which women live. This critical stance has opened the door for an alternative feminist discourse that centers the voices of marginalized women, especially those who have been subjected to colonial domination. Spivak's seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), is a

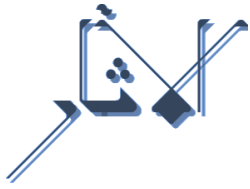


foundational text in postcolonial feminist thought. In this work, Spivak critiques both colonial and Western feminist discourses, arguing that the subaltern—specifically women in the Global South—has been silenced by both colonial powers and Western intellectual traditions. Spivak interrogates the representation and agency of women in postcolonial discourse, highlighting how colonial histories have shaped and often erased the voices of indigenous women. She emphasizes the necessity of understanding the ways in which these women navigate their social worlds, resisting both colonial oppression and the often patriarchal structures imposed by their own cultures. By challenging the Western feminist assumption that women's oppression is universally understood, Spivak urges scholars to consider the specific ways in which race, class, and colonial histories intersect in shaping women's identities and struggles. Her work remains a critical reference for understanding the complexities of gender and colonialism and offers valuable insights into the limitations of Western feminist approaches to postcolonial societies.

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* (1984) critiques the homogenization of women from the Global South in Western feminist scholarship. In her essay, Mohanty argues that Western feminists have historically constructed an image of the "Third World woman" as a singular, passive victim, overlooking the diversity and complexity of women's experiences across different cultures. This essentialist representation, she argues, fails to account for the cultural, political, and economic factors that shape women's lives in non-Western societies. Mohanty calls for a feminist framework that acknowledges the specificities of women's struggles and advocates for a more contextualized and intersectional approach to gender analysis. By challenging the Western tendency to universalize women's oppression, Mohanty's work emphasizes the importance of understanding women's experiences within their particular socio-historical contexts, offering a more diverse and inclusive feminist discourse. Her critique has been instrumental in reshaping postcolonial feminist thought and advocating for the inclusion of voices from the Global South in feminist debates.

Homi K. Bhabha (2019) has contributed to postcolonial feminist theory through his concept of hybridity, which examines the cultural and social dislocation caused by colonialism and the ways in which colonialism disrupts traditional social structures. Bhabha's work focuses on the hybrid identities formed at the intersection of colonial and indigenous cultures. The concept of hybridity is crucial in understanding how colonialism forces individuals, particularly women, to navigate multiple and often contradictory cultural and social expectations. Bhabha argues that colonialism not only imposes foreign norms but also disrupts indigenous ways of life, leading to new forms of cultural negotiation and resistance. Ahmad's work aligns with this scholarship by offering a critique of colonial legacies and their ongoing impact on gender roles and identities in South Asia. Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) explores how her female characters, especially Annette, negotiate their cultural identities in the wake of colonial influence. Annette's struggle to reconcile her Western identity with the cultural norms of Pakistan reflects Bhabha's theory of hybridity, as she navigates between two conflicting cultural spheres shaped by colonial histories.

In addition to critiquing Western feminist frameworks, postcolonial feminism has also been instrumental in critiquing the hegemonic structures of knowledge production. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991) have questioned the ways in which



Western epistemologies have dominated intellectual discourse, often marginalizing non-Western knowledge systems.

Overall, previous research in postcolonial feminism has laid the groundwork for understanding the complex ways in which colonialism intersects with gender, race, and class to shape women's experiences in postcolonial societies. Scholars like Spivak, Mohanty, and Bhabha have critiqued Western feminist frameworks and highlighted the importance of contextualizing women's experiences within their specific socio-historical and cultural contexts. Ahmad's work aligns with these contributions by offering a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of gender and identity in postcolonial Pakistan.

3. Research Methodology

This section discusses the data analysis methods used to explore Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) within the framework of postcolonial feminism. The research methodology used in this study is qualitative and interpretivism, focusing on understanding the text's thematic concerns and its representation of gender, identity, and the lingering effects of colonialism. Through the application of postcolonial feminist theory, this study seeks to analyze the intersections of gender, colonialism, and cultural identity as depicted in Ahmad's short stories, particularly Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) and to explore the complex ways in which women navigate postcolonial spaces.

3.1 Research Type

The study follows a qualitative research approach, which is most suitable for exploring the depth and complexity of postcolonial feminist themes within literary texts. This approach is ideal for literary analysis, as it allows for the interpretation of complex, context-specific insights derived from characters, narrative techniques, and thematic explorations. In this study, qualitative methods are employed to explore postcolonial feminist themes in Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014), specifically focusing on how Ahmad's characters, especially female protagonists, navigate the intersectionality of gender, colonialism, and cultural identity in postcolonial contexts.

3.2 Postcolonial Feminist Framework

Postcolonial feminist theory, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), provides the lens for analyzing *The Gatekeeper's Wife*. Spivak's concept of the subaltern and Mohanty's critique of Western feminism's tendency to universalize women's experiences are central to understanding the struggles of Ahmad's female characters, particularly Annette, in asserting their agency and identity. The study also draws upon Homi K. Bhabha's (2019) concept of hybridity, which examines the impact of colonialism on cultural identity and the formation of complex, hybrid identities in postcolonial societies. These theoretical frameworks allow the researcher to explore how Ahmad's characters negotiate the legacy of colonialism, gender oppression, and the quest for self-empowerment. The study employs textual analysis as the primary method for examining the text. This method allows the researcher to closely analyze the language, structure, themes, and character development within Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) applying a postcolonial feminist framework, the researcher will examine how Ahmad's characters, particularly female protagonists like Annette, navigate the complexities of colonialism, gender roles, and cultural identity.



4. Textual Analysis

The enduring pain of Annette illuminates the lived reality of a subaltern subjected to systemic oppression and marginalization. The pain she bears is not hers alone, it is the evidence of historical and structural violence that has been done against all women of her kind. Still, her trying "to shut the hurt out" and to pull herself together is a kind of strength. It is a survival mechanism, and it helps one to endure the trauma and keep surviving, even through all this pain. It is not rose-colored glasses resistance against all odds, resilience in this sense means continuing to unstick oneself from oppressive forces.

"She was circling the cage slowly, carefully moving inside the forbidden inner perimeter of the white railings." (Ahmad 2014, p. 5)

Analysis:

This extracted text explores various themes in relation to the resilience and empowerment of Tara, as a mother. In a somewhat symbolic manner, our act of walking around the cage and inside its forbidden perimeter epitomizes something that isn't as obvious or outwardly hostile, but instead embodies Tara's subtle forms of resistance; her willingness to break one of those restrictive rules. It is an understated form of resilience, not for show but instead emerging in her subtle rebellion as she bucks the constraints of her imprisonment to carve out a space where she may assert herself and understand what full humanity could mean for her. The cage is often a direct metaphor for the prison-like conditions in which her freedom and agency as an individual are restricted or confined by various cultural, social dynamics. Her slow, careful navigation of this small territory in some ways reveal an essence of her: a reflection on the struggle and survival that she must endure within its boundaries. She is not resigned to her imprisonment but tries to find outlets or means of transcending her confinement. Moving into the forbidden territory represents the character wanting his own power and freedom. When she does, it becomes a small but defiant middle finger toward the powers that be. This speaks to her unyielding heart in not allowing herself to be utterly limited and restricted by everything she is up against, for finding a place where her voice can exist - loudly. Tara moves slowly and while it may indicate a general disposition not to rock the boat, these are deliberate movements suggesting extreme care given what Tara knows about threatening the status quo. But more than this, the willingness to take these risks speaks of an underlying strength and determination that Tara has a mother. It shows how she would not back down in the face of possible repercussions and how determined she was to find a better sense of liberation as well as empowerment.

"Women, she said, are powerful beings. If you want your man to be utterly in your power all you have to do is to give him a drop of your own blood to drink." (Ahmad 2014, p.149)

Analysis:

But the quote emphasizes how women such as Nisa and Talat continue to strive in a male-dominated society where they are subject to few rights. Despite the unconventional nature of Talat's advice, he tells it in order to do justice with how inventive and lively women are determined to be so that they can survive and retain some power over their own lives whilst oppressed. It offers an openness to any and all tactics they can use in order to deal with the hard truths of their lives. To the promiscuous wife, it is implied that she should put menstrual blood on this tampon thingies' and then tell her husband he can only have sex with her if they use condoms. In a society that often



shames women's bodies and biological functions, Talat is reclaiming this female physicality as powerful. This subversive act not only goes against traditional patriarchal mores, but it also effectively recasts power dynamics within a relationship. While this quote hits the nail on the head when it comes to both resilience and empowerment, there is also a moral issue at stake here. Use of manipulation and control are morally squishier even (though not always) when one is in a situation where they themselves can be controlled. The answer raises other questions of where behavior should even be acceptable and what the fallout from past actions have been."

"Who she was, where she came from and what kind of love of animals this was that brought her out in the afternoon sun when most other women of her class still dozed in darkened rooms."
(Ahmad 2014. p.3)

Analysis:

The quotation embodies many themes of the flux and flow of women's emotions:

The fact that the superintendent could even say something about Annette's behavior being a little out of kilter for her class points to some societal expectations surrounding women's behaviors as well, especially within a certain cultural context. It claims that women of an appropriate caste are not supposed to be seen outside their homes in the afternoon. This restricts their emotional reality and expression, as they often have to live in privacy or follow conventions of passivity and domesticity. The quote also serves as a reminder of the impact gender, class and cultural origins have on how women feel emotionally. As it is time when women of her class had a certain set type for socially acceptable behavior, the "love of animals" Annette displays would be in opposition to that idea where simply as she an individual may have specific interests and wants to separate from society. The gap between what we want personally and fun necessity; it can become a painful distress full of alienation.

I chose to expose myself in the sun with administrators and interact more readily available animals, an act of agency and perhaps also emotional expression. It implies that she is not simply a slave to society and does care for the things she loves. While minor in nature, her defiance can be richly empowering for women often stymied by societal norms. The motives of etc., and the uniqueness, which relates to one of this film's themes revolving around individuality. Annette's odd behavior also throws the superintendent off his scent and rattles him through a concern she may be nuts, providing Lomartire an opportunity to note that all women of her class are not alike in experience or emotion. The mere idea that someone thinks all women have the same experience calls into even more question what female embodiment truly is because at this point, individual variation needs to be acknowledged.

In a sense, Annette breaking from traditions of the day represented her unyielding spirit. She resists the pressure to conform and asserts her own individuality by following where she knows best. It can be a very empowering act of defiance to own that space as women are often encouraged to deny their wants and behave in accordance with what society expects. In sum, the excerpt from Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) speaks to vast and intricate processes of emotionality related with social norms, gender expectations, intersectionality biasing among women insisted resonances as well as agonies emanated at once ago within personages. For as much focus is on women needing to contort themselves into boxes of what societal norms and



expectations say their lives should look like, it also shows that there are more important things at play highlighting agency within women's actions.

In the context of Spivak's theory on the Subaltern, this quote gives depth to how intersecting identities and social positioning play a role in women having emotional experiences such as who she was, where she came from; what kind of love for animals brought her out into the afternoon sun while most other dozed in darkened rooms. The theory of Spivak stresses this by showing how the essence and lives are largely unaccounted for, or worse misunderstood people so called as subaltern. The woman of a certain class and origin Annette gives shape to breaks out how she is expected to appear. The questions are a sign that the superintendent still has not understood how reality works with Annette, and what is there inside her mind which urges checks driven by emotion.

One of the most enduring things about Spivak's work is that it shows us something we are rarely looking for: how different social categories meet and create the subaltern. But the way in which Annette's feelings are filtered is not entirely down to her gender; other factors like social class, education and personality also come into play. That love of animals, which drives her eccentric actions, runs counter to the monolithic image we have been given about women's feelings and their experiences. Spivak's theory posits that the subaltern has agency to resist and maneuver within oppressive structures. By going out in the sun and being around animals, Annette is practically giving society a big middle finger. By depicting Lea in ways that ran counter to longstanding narratives of the behavior this sort of woman was expected to enact, we saw a portrayal not only with its own agency turned sexual but also opting for some other style emotional fucking aside from what had been previously articulated.

"WHAT WHAT'S YOUR NAME, dear? Fariha heard the nurse's voice dimly. The question worried her, as it penetrated through dark fields of numbness. She thought the answer might surface if only, if only she had a moment... to remember." (Ahmad 2014, p. 79)

Analysis:

In these few examples a number of women-specific emotional parallels can be seen through her inability to know her own name straight away illustrates how disorientated one can become in moments of silence. It is perhaps a traumatic, shocking experience or such an emotionally powerful defeat. Much of it is an exploration into ways women can emotionally split from sensation (the self) long enough for that moment to painfully bleed or linger, particularly when exacerbated by extremity in the form of stress and vulnerability. It symbolizes how damage anime ability to recollect work the foremost kind of life practicality whereas additionally investment emotions. Memory is fragmented and a numbing or dissociative sensation may develop during traumatic experiences. This, in turn can make it difficult for women to feel feelings and identify with their experiences, contributing to confusion and disorientation. Fariha yields to the nurse in order for her own name to be found, which demonstrates the way trauma can make one vulnerable and entirely dependent. If a woman has survived some kind of traumatic event - as millions have throughout history, war or personal trauma that is both common and invisible to many people who are forced smile every day in order to fulfill the roles they must play just because we live on society without really believing in their authenticity. It can be emotionally painful to rely on the approval of others, because it places us in bondage spiritually and mentally.



Fariha's story illuminates this multifaceted nature of women's relationship to their own emotions; it is created by both personal hesitation and societal repression. The expressions of trauma, loss and vulnerability range from amnesia to bewilderment to disorientation. The phenomenon itself is subjective and may vary greatly depending on gender roles, class background, race etc. To recap, this quote from "Nightmare" presents a compelling view of how the emotionally experiences messes with women. The painting underscores how trauma often leads to confusion, disempowerment and amnesia of self - subsequently illustrating that the work we need to do in healing is remembering what it feels like for us to have an identity and our own agency. In doing so, this image of the female feelings indirectly maps some territories where little light is shed a nuanced rendering of women's emotional lives as hidden and complex. This example from "Nightmare," in the context of Spivak's Subaltern theory, showcases how trauma is not just experienced emotionally by women scarred with vulnerable feminized racialized identities. Spivak demonstrates how the subordinated individual is compelled in his suffering to prove it, while a marginalized position means having very little chance of articulating such trauma. Fariha's amnesia is not just because of a side effect, but it shows how disconnected she is from her own self possibly due to the trauma that has taken over everything! This abjection of the self-mirrors a kind of silencing and elision that non-normative experiences are faced with since they are seen as incompatible or false when placed alongside hegemonic discourses.

The trauma that happens to Fariha is not just about herself, but all have strong associations with her gender, cultural origin and social positions. Her emotional ailments are complex, multifaceted and not understandable if looked at in a vacuum. This interconnected system of trauma and identity reveals the complex struggles that subaltern women go through, being victims not only to one form of humiliation or oppressiveness but multiple. "Nightmare" highlights the unspeakable nature of subaltern trauma and the silencing of subaltern voices. Fariha's struggle to articulate her name exemplifies the impossibility of expressing the depth of her trauma. It also shows the impossibility of expressing the emotional turmoil and disorientation she is living through. Silencing subaltern voices in this way further marginalizes subaltern women and inhibits their ability to heal from the violence done to their bodies and spirits. However, in the end, despite the magnitude of trauma's impact on her memory and identity, Fariha's amnesia is just a desire to remember her name. This desire is a blurred sign of agency that signifies not her power but her strength. This strength, however, is fragile; it is a testament that despite everything, her strength and her name is barely possible. Using Spivak's idea of providing alternative representations that permit subaltern enunciations and authorize non-Western people in the immigrant and decolonization discussions, this portrayal of Fariha's struggle entails a challenge to the usual tales about the mechanism of trauma and recovery. And to the reader, feel and know the subaltern women's difficulty sometimes.

"The nurse was trying to talk to Fariha, would you like to say goodbye to your husband now, dear?" (Ahmad 2014, p.83)

Analysis:

The line selected hits on many women's emotional experience's themes: it assumes Fariha would want a husband to say goodbye, which implies that her death was only important in relation to him. This assumption is indicative of a broader societal view that the most crucial emotional



relationship for women has to be with someone they are married to. It would be more constricting or exclusionary on the relationships a woman has in her life other than one with another.

This question blurs the line of allowing Fariha to be emotionally separated from her husband, which could connote helplessness or weakness. This can be especially true in a patriarchal society where women are reduced to their relationship status and who they have or want to share it with front page. From the quote, it seems like Fariha's husband is perhaps dead or very sick as a result, the themes of death and suffering arise out of this scenario. The emotional reality of women in grief and loss will look differently according to their personality types, cultural identities, support systems etc. Importantly, the presence of a nurse and an offered goodbye illustrate how nurses can support women in psychological distress. But the nurse's assumption about Fariha confirms an even bigger point: The risk of misreading or overshadowing a woman-specific experience can also be high.

This section analyses the interaction between the nurse and Fariha in "Nightmare" using Spivak's theory of Subaltern to examine how emotionally subjects contextualize their experiences based on societal norms, power plays as well by silencing voices from sub-ordinate class. Spivak's theory points out the utter hardship of subaltern individuals to articulate their pain, momentous and sorrow - grief and trauma. The silence of Fariha to the question of nurse speaks volumes on this silenced attitude. The imagined emotion she feels is not explicitly described, it leaves an overwhelming sorrow and confusion. This silence might be explained by societal expectations on how women are supposed to grieve. This is an instance of epistemic violence in that the nurse assumes she can predict Fariha's emotional experience and how it will be best accommodated. The nurse is honestly trying to connect, but in so doing she enforces a major master narrative of grief on Fariha - expecting her emotional reaction to an unimaginable loss (in the dominant culture) would be uniformly placed into neat little boxes that easily translate with societal expectation. In or through this erasure of Fariha's aloneness her experience-or singularity as an individual-remains impervious to the limits imposed by dominant discourses on understanding and representing the emotional lives of subaltern women.

"Her mother had always stressed the dignity and value of reserve. A good woman she used to say, knows how to keep the family's secrets." (Ahmad 2014, p.151)

Analysis:

This lady saying to her daughter, "keep the family secrets," is typical of a cultural desire for women to not just hide their pain but put on a face of being happy and drama-free no matter what your husband did or that she has lost another baby. Such repression eventually stifles internalized emotional pain and forsakes true feelings. Buck adds, "With her praise of dignity and value of reserve she falls into another traps: the echo that convinces girls they are how to talk, or what quality a woman must have. Women who internalize these norms may, in turn, feel closed off from their emotional experience and even guilty or ashamed when they do not live up to gendered expectations.

The continuous suppression and what seems like the compulsion to smile through it all, added with trapped family secrets shuns women's mental wellbeing in remote phases. Women may develop symptoms of depression and anxiety -and other mental health issues- while attempting to reconcile their internal realities with the expectations being placed on them. These women feel an



added layer of emotional pressure from the expectation to conform with traditional ideas of gender - and pressures towards heteronormative relationships. This was a well-meaning approach that simply reinforced an entire system of oppression rooted in misogyny and the repression - which it itself is responsible for creating - of authentic female emotional expression. The mother reinforces the patriarchal structures that contribute to women's cognitive and emotional dissonance by prioritizing the family's reputation over her daughter's wellbeing.

The Subaltern, as portrayed by Spivak, includes voices that are socially disadvantaged based on several factors including gender. What kind of humans would do such things and claim a noble nature for their actions? - Women living in patriarchal societies, detached from expression to then be oppressed as lesser beings. When Nisa told her mother that she was reluctant to read the article so as not to disrupt how "happy" they are, and asked whether she gets lost in these arguments too because of them herself or steered clear of feeling all alone. If you read the text, it talks about how society expects women to toughen up because of their underlying womanhood but do not like having cold-hearted women around. This advice is a recurring theme in an earlier episode where Nisa's mother emphasizes the female emotions can never carry more weight than her family's honor. This silence could be seen then as a part of subaltern inability that is concerning language-to articulate what they suffer and their desires within so-called mainstream culture.

5. Findings and Conclusion

The short stories of Rukhsana Ahmad offers a nuanced and multifaceted and polygonal portrayal of Pakistani women grappling with societal constraints. Through rich narrative layers, Ahmad illustrates the struggles of existence, emotional turmoil, and the complex challenges that women face in a patriarchal society. The stories highlight the diversity of women's experiences in Pakistan and emphasize the need for societal transformation to address the deep-rooted causes of gender inequality.

In Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife*, (2014) Annette finds solace and support from animals in the zoo, which offer her a reprieve from her turbulent experience in Pakistan. The unique bond she forms with them symbolizes empathy and mutual care, illustrating how support networks can help women cultivate inner strength. Similarly, in *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon*, Nisa's support from Talat, an older woman who guides her growth, highlights the role of mentorship and solidarity in empowering women. Nisa's small, quiet acts of rebellion against societal norms reflect the resilience that emerges from everyday acts of defiance. In *The Nightmare*, Fariha's confrontation with the trauma she faces illustrates a difficult but essential process of healing and reclaiming agency.

Ahmad's stories also highlight the importance of self-awareness and agency. Talat's cryptic advice to Nisa about "the art" to change her life suggests that understanding oneself can be a powerful tool for liberation. Even when Nisa's experiment with voodoo does not succeed, the act symbolizes her desire for control and agency in her life, suggesting that small steps toward self-empowerment can make a difference.

Throughout Ahmad's stories, there is a subversion of traditional gender roles. Characters like Mumtaz in *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon*, who defies the constraints of widowhood to live independently, and Annette in *The Gatekeeper's Wife*, who questions her traditional roles as a wife, challenge the patriarchal expectations placed on women. These stories implicitly suggest



that female solidarity and support networks can empower women, creating communities that foster resistance and social change.

The emotional turmoil experienced by characters like Nisa in *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon* is indicative of the inner conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. Nisa's struggle to reconcile her individuality with her desire to conform to societal norms speaks to the emotional distress caused by the pressure to conform to rigid gender roles. Similarly, in *The Gatekeeper's Wife*, Annette experiences isolation and alienation despite her position of privilege, as she navigates the cultural divide between her Western identity and the societal expectations of her marriage in Pakistan. Through characters like Annette, Nisa, and Fariha, Ahmad portrays how women, despite overwhelming odds, find strength within themselves to adapt, survive, and reclaim agency. These stories reflect the unseen emotional labor women endure, their constant battle against societal pressures to conform to age-old gender roles, and the harsh realities they face, such as domestic violence, marital rape, and cultural displacement. However, Ahmad also highlights the resilience that emerges from these struggles, emphasizing that empowerment often begins with internal change. Whether it's Annette's connection to zoo animals, Nisa's quiet rebellion, or Fariha's confrontation with her painful past, these characters find power in the most unexpected places, symbolizing the refusal to be defined by their circumstances. Ahmad's work serves as a reminder of the ongoing fight for gender equality in Pakistan and a call to recognize the strength and spirit of women. Her stories challenge us to rethink the systems that oppress women and advocate for a society where their voices are heard, their rights protected, and their potential fulfilled.

References

- Ahmad, R. (2021). *The Gatekeeper's Wife*. Lahore: Penguin Books.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2019). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Chakravorty Spivak, G. (1988). *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (2021). *Intersectionality: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender*. In J. Hill Collins & S. Bilge (Eds.), *Intersectionality* (2nd ed., pp. 15-29). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hooks, B. (2014). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press.
- Merriam, S. B., Tisdell, E. J., Gavin, M., & Gildan, J. (2019). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. Wiley.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. *Feminist Review*, (30), 61-88.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2009). *Research Methods for Business Students* (5th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Watson, R. (2015). *The Nature of Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications.