NARRATIVES OF CONFESSION: RELIGION AND PATRIARCHY IN THE FICTION OF SHAHRAZ AND HOSSEINI

Munazza Yaqoob
Department of English,
Female Campus, International Islamic University,
Islamabad

Abstract

This paper discusses Khalid Hosseini’s novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Qaisra Shahraz’s novel *Typhoon* as social commentaries on the socio-cultural oppressive structures both established and perpetuated by patriarchy, and by patriarchal interpretations of religion to subordinate and victimise women in Pakistani and Afghani societies. The paper also examines these texts as narratives of confession, unfolding crimes and injustices as committed in the name of religion and culture against weak and vulnerable members of the society. Both of these narratives, as forms of confession, voice through, not only their female characters but also men, that ‘the sacred’ is an effective patriarchal apparatus centred on justifying male control and dominance while denying basic human rights to women, thus relegating them to a secondary position. Through a critical examination of centuries-old socio-cultural norms, which have achieved the status of ‘sacred’ in such societies, these texts reveal various practices of domestic and structural violence through which the sins of injustice, cruelty, oppression and victimisation of women in the name of culture and religion are justified and exercised in daily life. Both *Typhoon* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, as narratives of confession, document emotional, psychological, physical, sexual and structural violence committed against women and voice resistance against the oppressive social practices of their respective societies. As narratives of confession, these two texts authenticate the truth presented in the form of fiction.
**Keywords**

Religion and patriarchy, South Asian fiction, social injustice, domestic and structural violence

**Introduction: Religion-Patriarchy Nexus in the South Asian Society**

*Typhoon* (2003) by Qaisra Shahraz and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khalid Hosseini take patriarchy and its destructive impact on South Asian societies, regarding women’s oppression and human rights abuse, as their central issue. Through a feminist theoretical lens that reviews and theorises various types of violence committed against women and their causes, this paper analyses *Typhoon* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to explore how patriarchy relegates women to subordinate positions and denies them basic human rights in Pakistani and Afghani societies, making women vulnerable to violence. Analysis of the texts, with a clear focus on emotional, psychological, physical, sexual and structural violence, establishes these books as voices of confession of the crimes and abuse committed against women in the name of culture, religion and law. Shahraz depicts Pakistani society in *Typhoon*, where patriarchy is a deep-rooted cultural tradition, while Hosseini portrays Afghani society, where patriarchy is not only a tradition rooted in centuries-old culture, but also a policy protected and imposed by State law. The discussion regarding patriarchy as a social system in South Asian society also focuses on the role of religion, as depicted in these two novels, to investigate how religion is interpreted in such a way as to support cultural tradition and state policy to perpetuate and enforce patriarchal structures within society. This paper builds on the discussion regarding patriarchy as a social system in South Asian society.

Patriarchy is the ‘institutionalisation of male dominance’ (French, 1985, p. 239) and a social system ‘enforced through violence and the threat of violence. It is a system developed and controlled by powerful men, in which, women, children, other men, and nature itself are dominated’ (Christ, 2013). While men in patriarchal societies control all major institutions of society, such as culture, politics, and religion, women are placed through the power of these institutions in a subordinated position. Thus, patriarchy, functioning through such institution and state policies, restricts women’s mobility and further increases their dependence on men in a systematic way. Since all three institutions are monopolised by men, they serve to empower men and work as oppressive apparatuses for women to weaken them. Patriarchy thus is a political system ruled by men in which women have inferior social and political status and are denied fundamental rights (Kottak, 2000, pp. 274–76, 290).

In patriarchal societies, such as that of South Asia, the kinship-based social structure further divides the society on gender lines by assigning controlling positions to
Religion & Patriarchy in the Fictions of Shahraz & Hosseieni

men and subordination to women (Matherma, 1998, as cited in Sharma, p. 79). For Sharma (2014), girls in these countries, from early childhood, are made aware of their inferior status to the male members in the family, and obedience to male members is inculcated in them. They grow with a consciousness that they are weak, both physically and emotionally, and so are dependent on their male family members—for not only economic means, but also for social survival. Thus, in the patriarchal social order of South Asian societies, Sharma argues that ‘authority is vested upon the man who takes responsibility for maintenance of family, for he is considered stronger than women’ (p. 79). This sense of inferiority to male members and dependence upon them are the main factors exposing women to various other forms of social injustices, such as limited facilities for education and health, limited access to a public sphere, and denial of freedom to choose. The result of their inaccessibility to resources through restricted social mobility weakens their social position and further establishes gender inequality in the society.

In South Asian societies, discrimination between men and women is ‘generally marked, definite, and largely non-negotiable’ (Lau, 2002, p. 81). According to Nainar (2013), all countries in South Asia—which include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—are ‘agrarian economies’; and patriarchy as a system of male domination effectively operates in these countries through ‘monopoly in religion and culture’ along with State laws and ‘mode of production’ (p. 1). Narayan (1997), discussing women’s deplorable conditions in these societies, regards their misery as ‘death by culture’ (p. x). Kandiyot (1988) also considers that such societies function on the principles of classical patriarchy. Thus, the South Asian ‘masculinised’ culture, which relegates women to the margin and forces them into a powerless position, where they are dependent on men, is the underlying cause of the oppression exercised against women in these societies. This situation makes women vulnerable to violence.

Because patriarchy in these societies functions as a social system, and as women’s oppression and discrimination against them is sanctioned and ratified by the culture and centuries-old tradition in the name of region, culture in such societies therefore operates through two important institutions: family (kinship) and religion. Women are known by their kinship position in relation to men (Richard, 2006, p. 324). In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, ‘the extended family is the basic functional unit’ (Hakim, 1992, p. 72); in such family, the eldest male usually holds the dominant position in deciding all matters of the family, including marriages and education. Women in traditional extended families are mainly considered responsible for the domestic space and are accordingly, engaged in childbearing and rearing, cooking, cleanliness, and other household-related tasks. They are also expected to fulfil familial duties requiring obedience to father and husband, and service centred on providing all comfort to them. Women’s sacrifice of their own comfort and even happiness is rationalised by the view that men protect women and work outside
the home to provide the necessities of life. Thus, the demarcation of space and related roles for men and women in the patriarchal family restrict women’s presence in public space and, as a result, their participation in economic and political activities. Such segregation secludes them to private and domestic spaces. As a result, this situation deprives women of social and economic power, and instead positions them in a subordinate station in social hierarchy.

Religion in these societies, as Jamal (2005) recognises, is an important institution empowering culture and its oppressive traditions. Jamal supports her opinion regarding the use of religion in oppressing women in South Asian societies through making reference to feminist movements in the subcontinent, particularly that against Islamisation during the Zia military regime. Spanning 1979–1989 in Pakistan, the Zia regime launched State-sponsored oppression against women and subsequently violated their basic human rights (p. 61). She maintains that the strongest barriers to women’s movements for emancipation since the British Indian period in the region is religion and culture. Jamal’s stance reflects that of progressive and secular feminists who consider religion to be one of the main reasons underpinning women’s subordinate position in patriarchal societies. Hashim (1998), echoing Sarah White (1992), also argues that ‘women are often represented as subordinated in religious texts’ and, in this way, ‘religion is used to justify and maintain men’s dominant position in society’ (p.7).

However, many Muslims reject this argument and emphasise the rights of women denied in secular societies, which are ensured and protected in Islam (Afshar, 1997). For most Muslims, it is the interpretation of religion that has created a misunderstanding, as referring to Ali (1993) in ‘Reconciling Islam and Feminism’, Iman Hashim states, ‘There is a significant gap between what the Qur’an says and the manner in which its teachings are practised’ (1998, p. 9). Since social and religious institutions are dominated and controlled by men, religion is therefore interpreted in line with the practices and accepted social norms of patriarchal tradition. The distortion of religious interpretation and understanding confuses the culture that perpetuates patriarchy and male dominance, and ultimately becomes another apparatus to subordinate women.

Thust, violence against women or gender-based violence in such societies has become a cultural norm because, as discussed above, culture operating through the institution of family and religion establishes women’s dependence on men. Unequal gender relationships are formed when women are refused social mobility and denied entrance to the public sphere. They are made vulnerable and become victims of gender-based violence. Bagchi (2005), referring to Article1 of the UN World Conference on Human Rights 1993, discusses violence against women, or gender-based violence, as a ‘violence which jeopardises fundamental rights, individual freedom and women’s physical
integrity’ (p. 115). Similarly, Article 1 of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) explains it as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life’ (para. 14). As per these definitions, women in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in much the same way as in other South Asian societies, are exposed to almost all types of violence. The most common forms of violence committed against them include verbal abuse, physical violence, psychological/emotional violence, sexual violence, cultural violence (honour killing, dowry killing, child marriages and forced marriages), economic violence and legal violence (making laws and policies to restrict women’s participation in politics and other areas of public sphere) (Tabassum, 2016, pp. 89–90).

From Traditions to Texts: Violence against Women

Both Typhoon and A Thousand Splendid Suns offer several references to the cultural norms and traditions in Pakistan and Afghanistan that establish the controlling position of men, resulting in multiple forms of gender-based violence. The concept of gender-based violence provides ‘a new context in which to examine and understand the phenomenon of violence against women’ and has ‘shifted the focus from women as victims of violence to gender and the unequal power relationships between women and men that are created and maintained through gender stereotypes’ (Alexander, p. 836). The most common form of violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as illustrated in the novels examined in this paper, is domestic violence, with home recognised as an important space determining gender relationships that perpetuate culturally approved gender-specified roles. Amirthalingam (2005) believes that, ‘domestic violence has been on the global agenda for several decades’ (p. 683), and further explains that ‘the key to understanding domestic violence from a gender perspective is to appreciate that the root cause of violence lies in an unequal power relationship between men and women that is compounded in male-dominated societies’ (p. 684). Social norms, as said before, being based on kinship in Pakistani and Afghani societies, give ‘the husband the right to use force to discipline wives who are perceived to be violating traditional gender norms’ (Jha 2000). As the selected novels highlight, these gender-specified roles in the domestic space become one of the important factors fuelling violence against women.

Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns is replete with incidents of domestic violence. He takes the domestication of women resulting in violence against them as one of the central themes of his novel and discusses it as a cultural tradition exercised for centuries in Afghanistan. Laila’s father tells her about the Pushtun region near the Pakistani border, where ‘women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in the burqa and accompanied
by men’ (p. 33). The novel relates that women are refused appearance in the public domain, are confined to domestic space, and are at the mercy of their controlling husbands, fathers or brothers. The two main characters in the novel, Maryam and Laila, experience the worst forms of domestic violence; they are beaten several times by their husband, Rasheed, for various reasons, such as not cooking his meal of choice, not having borne sons as per his strong desire, making attempts to go out without permission, or sometimes simply because he is in a bad mood or is unhappy.

The text reveals that ‘there was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she [Maryam] did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn’t enough’ (p. 98). Maryam says that her married life with Rasheed was like living in perpetual ‘fear of his stifling mood, his volatile temperament’ and that many times ‘he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks’ (pp. 97–98). He harasses both Maryam and Laila on a daily basis; once, he did not like the meal cooked by Maryam and so, in reaction, forced her to eat pebbles (p. 102). Maryam loses one of her teeth as a result and was deeply agonised by this brutal act.

As regards the second novel, Typhoon, we do not find an example of brutal physical violence, but nonetheless female characters undergo psychological and emotional violence in the roles of wives and daughters. Because the culture of Pakistani society—much like Afghani society—assigns dominant and controlling positions to men, as fathers, husbands or the eldest of the family, women are forced to be obedient and are intimidated to submit to the men’s will. Women, as Typhoon illustrates, have no right to challenge, nor even demonstrate any resistance to men, because the culture considers it a stigma for women to raise any ‘loud resistance’ against this injustice and oppression (Tabassum, 2016, p. 87). Even if they show any passive resistance, they are tabooed as insolent and dishonoured. Thus, they are suppressed in the name of honour and modesty to respect men, as outlined by their cultural and religious obligations. Their emotions stifle and they suffer emotional wreckage.

Siraj Din in Typhoon daily indulged in an argument with his wife Zulaikha in their bedroom, with the aim of taming her to submit to his will and not argue back. He ‘never quite reconciled himself ’to her demands and expectations of ‘equality and respect’. His efforts centred on his desire to ‘tame’ her (p. 143). He ostracised his wife’s boldness and ability to argue with him, but allowed her to disagree in their private bedroom space on the condition that she had to show complete obedience and respect to him in public space. Thus, Zulaikha ‘accorded him the respect due to him as a husband and as a village landlord’ (p. 143). Zulaikha even argued that, as per her religion, Allah (God) is her master and Siraj Din is a human being, just like her, and so she should be treated with ‘respect and equality’ (p. 143).
Nonetheless, as the text depicts, both culture and cultural understanding of religion require women to be modest and men authoritative, which maintains gender-specified behaviours and roles. Zulaikha is coerced, as well as culturally conditioned, and in the public space is seen to be a woman who ‘adopted the demure look of a dutiful wife, who took her place with pride beside her husband’ (p. 145). She carries the burden of family honour that demands that she be respectful to her husband and approve his public actions, even if or when he is wrong. When Siraj Din makes the unjust decision against Naghmana and orders ‘the tragic lynching of an innocent woman’ (p. 190) in ‘Kacheri’ (community public court), Shahraz writes that Zulaikha ‘wanted to shout to him—to end this farce, but her lips sealed with decades of decorum and social propriety, wouldn’t obey. A good wife didn’t make her husband lose face in public’ (p. 191). She feels agonised and tortured to see the cruel treatment of an innocent young woman Naghmana and ‘cries inside, feeling faint’ (p. 191), but is not authorised to raise her voice and show opposition against this ruthless form of injustice.

The novel also shows that women’s dependence on men and their subordination to the decisions made by men, as established in domestic space, also affect women’s positioning in the public sphere. Women being conditioned for centuries remain silent, dependent, submissive and compliant to men and their decisions outside the home. Siraj Din, with the authority vested upon him by the culture as the village elder and head of the community public court, forces Haroon to divorce his beloved wife, Naghmana, against each other’s will. His decision and its forced implementation go against religion, which his wife Zulaikha and other villagers understand; however, even then, with his distorted understanding of religion, he tells Naghmana that ‘it was in your kismet [fate] to be divorced from Haroon. Go home, my daughter. May Allah give you peace’ (p. 194). No woman in the public court is allowed to participate in the decision-making; thus, Naghmana is emotionally and psychologically victimised by the unjust decision of a man. Her life is ruined, but she is not permitted to show resistance. Women like Zulaikha live in continuous suppression and undergo emotional violence that is accepted and practiced as being the norm of a ‘normal’ married life, and, like Naghmana, are lynched in the name of honour in Pakistan. Domestic space in Typhoon, as in the case of A Thousand Splendid Suns, oppresses women’s voices and their essential human selves. Shahraz’s text draws readers’ attention to a very subtle form of violence committed against women in Pakistan—almost on a daily basis—in the name of obedience to men and cultural/religious traditions.

The novels also portray sexual abuse as a form of domestic violence, with women forced to have sex against their consent and will. Sexual violence, in the forms of rape, particularly marital rape, provides a focus in both of the selected texts. Referring to Article 9.2 of the Asian Human Rights Charter, Amirthalingam (2005) regrets sexual violence against women in patriarchal societies and states, ‘Forcing a woman to have sex against her
Munazza Yaqoob

will is the most blatant form of enforcing male dominance. It is a brutal statement that she has no autonomy or rights' (p. 693). Sexual violence appears as a ‘normal’ requirement of married life in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Rasheed, being a husband who provides his wives with shelter and food at home, considers forced sex with his wives against their consent as his right. He never realises the pain caused by his forced act (p. 76). For Maryam, ‘their coupling’ remains ‘an exercise in tolerating pain’ (p. 82). Maryam and Laila, being uneducated and without any professional skills and economic opportunities, are required to submit to his will, and, as a result, become subjects of the worst form of sexual violence.

The novel also makes subtle reference to the role of cultural and patriarchal understanding of religion in permitting forced sex in marital relationships. Women’s unwillingness is culturally interpreted, as ‘shame’ and coyness, and they are convinced— or even forced— to give consent through arguments based on distorted interpretations of religion. Rasheed says to Maryam, after sleeping with her against her will and without her consent, ‘there is no shame in this, Maryam … it’s what married people do. It’s what the Prophet himself and his wives did’ (p. 76). Such false interpretations also illustrate the patriarchal culture and culturally interpreted religion as depriving Maryam and Laila of a right to their own bodies and lives. These women are like domestic animals, kept and confined within a domestic sphere for the service and pleasure of men.

*Typhoon* discusses sexual violence committed against women in the form of rape through the story of Kaneez. She is raped by the brother-in-law of her sister at age sixteen. As the novel informs, she conceals her tragedy from everyone throughout her life because, in Pakistani society, a woman who is raped is considered taboo for the family honour and is accused as a criminal and disgraced woman. Thus, she has to carry the burden of family honour. She feels ashamed and remains fearful her entire life (p. 229). Undergoing a psychological pain with ‘a traumatised mind’ (p. 231), she does not find any happiness in marriage and refuses to re-marry following the death of her husband at a very young age. She develops fear and disgust against a sexual relationship with men (pp. 226–27). Women are raped and not considered victims, but rather partners in crime. They cannot even share their suffering or the injustices done to them for fear of losing their honour and their family’s honour in support of men. Kaneez’s story refers to the traditions relegating women to men’s authority. Through such traditional thinking, a woman is deprived of her independence and free will, and is put under the authority and surveillance of men. Such distorted traditional standards of honour and modesty cause various forms of psychological and emotional violence to be imposed upon women. The conventional thinking and social system developed by patriarchy thus manoeuvres to position women to a station of dependence upon men and accordingly makes their position vulnerable in society. Thus, the novel directs readers’ attention to the tradition of making women the custodian of family honour through oppression.
Another critical issue raised and discussed in these two novels is ‘Purdah’ (veil), which is used as a useful apparatus sanctioned by both culture and the cultural understanding of religion to oppress women and make them vulnerable to violence. Purdah is a deep-rooted cultural tradition—as well as a religious obligation—in the societies of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Purdah means that women have to ‘cover themselves (above their clothes)’, which includes different items, such as the burqa, chador and abbaya (Tabassum, 2016, p.23). Much like other traditions and culturally distorted religious norms practiced in Pakistan and Afghanistan, purdah is used as a tool to make women subservient and invisible in the public sphere (Naik, 2008, p. 63). By limiting women’s mobility, they are deprived of educational and economic employment opportunities and political participation. Supporting this opinion, Mumtaz & Shaheed write, ‘the false values attending purdah, which place a premium on segregation and the seclusion of women, reduce many to being a captive labour force ... immobile, ignorant and isolated one from the other. .they end up facing extreme exploitation’ (p. 26). Purdah, as a dress code, serves as an ‘open statement of social, religious and above all cultural discourse’ (Tabassum, 2016, p. 21). Purdah is mandatory, both culturally and religiously, for women in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Double standards of morality for men and women propagated by religious scholars are another basic cause for women’s secondary position. In this situation, men are free to participate in politics, have formal employment and dominate the public sphere, while women, in contrast, remain confined to homes or have limited freedom for social mobility and economic pursuits (Hussain, 1987, p. 11). Purdah, in both these novels, is presented as the symbol of power controlling women’s bodies and their social lives, to ensure their complete dependence upon and submission to the will of the men. At the same time, it is used to keep a check on women’s agency and their access to material resources of empowerment. Discussing the role of purdah in Afghani society, Ayotte & Husain (2005) make mention of RAWA’s website, which states that ‘[w]hen forcibly imposed, the burqa becomes a misogynistic instrument of terror designed to objectify women, relegating their social status to that of ‘chattel’ by making them literally invisible in the Afghan public sphere...’ (p. 128).

In A Thousand Splendid Suns, Rasheed’s wives are secluded in the domestic space, with Burqa forcefully imposed on them whenever they are allowed to go out (p. 71). Similarly, in Typhoon, Naghma’s arrival in the village by driving her own car with no head covering is completely frowned upon by the village elders, especially Siraj Din. Shahraz depicts this scene as if ‘she was a stranger in “his” village and one who didn’t attempt to cover head’ (p. 12). His displeasure takes her boldness, self-reliance and confidence as immodesty, and accordingly develops his prejudice against her, as reflected in his unjust decision in the public court against her. She is forced to appear a shameless
woman in the public court, headed by Siraj Din. With his authority, he passes a verdict that, if she is chaste and modest, she must have her head lowered and face covered.

Naghmana, in the public court, is under the complete authority of men for the certification of her character. She is dependent upon men’s decision for her act of falling in love with Haroon and marrying him without their approval and permission. She is made weak, dependent, and dispossessed of all confidence and self-assurance. She is pressured to ask for divorce against her will, and feels as if in front of her there is a ‘line of hundreds of cobras, all poised and ready to strike her with their venom... Her head drop[s] on her shoulders. Defeated.’ (p. 188). She is graced with the title of ‘a true noble woman’ (p. 194) as she accepts the decision without any resistance, with her head lowered. Naghmana’s sacrifice of her desire for the sake of others and her covered and lowered head thus makes purdah a symbol of a cultural norm, which confirms women’s subservience and subordination to men and the powerful patriarchal social order, honouring a woman’s sacrifices, but without regard for her happiness, emotions or desires. Typhoon also implies that head covering, or purdah, serves as a sign of a woman’s submission to the social patriarchal order and men’s power. She is victimised for being self-reliant and confident, which is the negation of gender-specified roles and is thus threatening to a man’s position.

Purdah operates in different forms in Pakistani and Afghani societies, as depicted in the selected novels: it not only means the full covering of the body but also justifies the domestic confinement and limited—or altogether no—visibility in the public sphere. This tradition, which is sanctioned by cultural understanding of religion, confining women at home in the domestic space, cuts them off from the public sphere, which offers resources of empowerment and thus deprives them of the social privileges available to men through their access to the public sphere. The limited access provided to women is permitted if they are adequately covered or accompanied by their male relatives. In this way, purdah, as an instrument of patriarchy, deprives women of their social rights. The concept of purdah in this context, which is notably used to protect women’s modesty and family honour, functions as the best means in the hands of patriarchy to place women under restrictions, resulting in various types of violence against them.

Both Typhoon and A Thousand Splendid Suns illustrate the fact that spaces for men and women are demarcated in Pakistani and Afghani society. Male characters, in both of the texts, are in controlling positions as the heads of families within the house, and have freedom for social mobility. Siraj Din, being the head of the family, controls all matters related to land, business and community, and makes all decisions regarding the social and religious matters of his community. On the contrary, his wife, Zulaikha, along with other women in his family and the village, are all confined to the domestic sphere where they are yoked in ‘centuries-old drudgery’ (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 17), i.e. managing
household tasks, taking care of children and cooking. Women’s free time is spent in unproductive activities, such as making sandals and paying courtesy visits to one another.

The character of Kaneez, on the other hand, offers an interesting insight into the life of women in Pakistani society who choose to live a different life. She refuses to marry and looks after all the business matters herself, daring to decide for her own life. However, the narrative, in subtle ways, helps readers notice that the community, rooted in old traditions, does not appreciate her decision to live an independent life with access to the public sphere. The village elder, Siraj Din, her own sister, and the community as a whole, including her suitors, try to convince her that her life is barren and incomplete without a male companion (p. 227). The concept of an independent woman living alone, with no male companion, is not only disproved of but also considered a sign of ‘abnormality’, in that such women and her choice to manage her economic resources outside the home go against the culturally stereotyped image of a woman. The narrative exposes the deeply embedded thinking of traditional Pakistani society, which considers it unnatural, unthinkable and abnormal for a woman to choose a life independent of a male companion and looking after a business rather than finding comfort in the domestic space.

Similarly, in A Thousand Splendid Suns, Rasheed makes his wives understand how indispensable he is for being a shelter-provider for the family, and therefore demands all the comfort at home to be managed by his wives because he earns for them (p. 209). Another character, Jalil, also has the freedom to move in public life and to manage all the business and matters outside the home. His wives are confined to looking after the children and kitchen. The novel portrays women as domestic slaves, deprived of education, employment and freedom to move, and completely dependent on their husbands (p. 218). The domestication of women in both societies is executed in obedience to culture and religion, which relegates women to subordination and positions them as vulnerable; hence, they are easy victims of all types of violence.

In this regard, Ayotte & Husain (2005) consider that ‘One of the most important advances in the history of feminism was the recognition of structural violence against women as a significant aspect of gender oppression. Structural violence includes the myriad material harms done to women through inadequate education and healthcare, exploitative employment conditions, endemic poverty, and other conditions that inflict damage on lives without the brute immediacy of physical violence’ (p. 126). The concept of structural violence was introduced by Galtung (1969), referring to all forms of violence wherein socio-political structures deprive people of their basic human rights and privileges. Structural violence thus ‘creates conditions where interpersonal violence can occur and shape gendered forms of violence [emphasis original] that place women in vulnerable positions’ in society (Montesanti, 2015, para. 8). For Price (2012), structural violence poses a challenge to the
narrow notions of abuse committed against women and refers to all variegated forms of violence. Shahraz criticises narrow assumptions of violence that reduce various types of violence committed against women in multiple spaces simply to domestic violence. She draws attention to the variegated forms of institutionalised violence, which are produced and reinforced by socio-cultural and political institutions and histories. Structural violence, thus, is a reason for other types of violence against women, forcing them to be dependent, subordinated and weak.

Research in the field builds an understanding that, along with culture and religion, when patriarchy becomes a state policy, and when through State power misogyny is institutionalised, the worst forms of structural violence against women are committed in patriarchal societies. Studies by Mills & Lewis (2003), Bhavnani, Foran & Kurian (2003), Davis (1961) and Richie (2003) all regard the State as responsible and as a supporter of the brutal forms of abuse inflicted upon women through State institutions, such as laws and socio-economic policies. Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns resents violence against women, not only as a deep-rooted religious-cultural tradition in Afghanistan, but also as State-sponsored misogyny. The novel explores how institutionalised patriarchy and misogyny during Taliban rule cause hideous forms of oppression upon women. The State-sponsored misogyny operated through laws and the constitution of the State of Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. The text informs readers that soon after Taliban take control of the country, they implemented Islam as the State religion, which resulted in the worst form of distorted interpretations of Islam practically executed as State law.

The Taliban established their regime in 1996 and announced their State policy, carved on the principles of Islam. According to their newly designed and implemented system in the Islamic state of Afghanistan, singing, music-playing, dancing, gambling (including chess and card-playing), painting and other forms of art, such as film, cultural festivals, such as kite-flying, and many other entertainment and cultural-intellectual activities, were forbidden, with strict punishments announced for those who did not abide by the law. Special laws, as per the new Islamised policy, made the burqa mandatory for women, with females forbidden to show their visibility in a public space without being accompanied by their fathers, brothers, sons or husbands (pp. 270–71). This particular law orders them to stay at home and puts a ban on education, employment and even public healthcare amongst women. They are also prohibited from showing their faces in public, laughing, or even looking at males outside their home (p. 271). Vicki Mabrey reports that the burqa and the seclusion of women within domestic space becomes ‘the symbol of the Taliban’s power’ (‘Unveiled’, 2001). Thus State-sponsored and -supported misogyny is a proclamation of power by the new regime, which is established on a foundation of forcing women into subordination.
Women, as portrayed in A Thousand Splendid Suns, are victims of patriarchal culture, patriarchal understanding of religion, as well of State-sponsored misogyny. All of these power institutions, as described in the novel, collectively work to weaken women and establish patriarchal control. Hence, structural violence, as caused by the misogynist State policy through State institutions and tools, becomes the main reason for human rights abuse against women; they are banned from public spaces, denied education, healthcare, professional employment, entertainment and access to resources, and are placed under the complete control of their husbands, fathers and brothers. Maryam and Laila suffer hideous forms of violence by their husband Rasheed after the misogynist State policy is implemented in Afghanistan. These women are physically, sexually and psychologically tortured by Rasheed, who is their absolute master and who is afforded authorisation by State law to control women by force (p. 218). He has the authority to confine them at home or brutally beat them if they disobey (pp. 261–62). When they are caught trying to escape, the police send them back to Rasheed, saying, ‘What a man does in his home is his business... As a matter of policy, we do not interfere with private matters’, and further states, this is a ‘private family affair’ (p. 260).

As mentioned earlier, women in South Asian societies suffer from structural violence in the form of the absence of proper healthcare and education facilities. A Thousand Splendid Suns portrays the most inadequate healthcare facilities among women as occurring during the Taliban regime. Laila delivers her child in a hospital where there is no ‘clear water ... no oxygen, no medicine, no electricity’ (p. 283). She undergoes surgery without anaesthesia and suffers the worst pain of her life (pp. 284–85). As regards education, all the main characters in the novel are either illiterate or have some primary religious education given at home. Only Laila has the opportunity to go to school before her parents died during the Civil War in that country. She was fortunate to have this privilege because her father was a supporter of communists and rebelled against tribal local cultural and religious traditions.

In Typhoon, the author does not refer to State-sponsored misogyny or patriarchy in Pakistan, although the history of Pakistan reveals that, during the military regime spanning 1979–1989, military dictator General Zia ul Haq imposed the most oppressive laws against women in the name of Islamisation of the State in Pakistan. State laws during Zia rule, much like those of the Taliban regime, restricted women’s social mobility, restrained them to the domestic private sphere, and imposed purdah and complete segregation of men and women in the public domain (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 86). Though the novel is not set during Zia’s regime, the impact of these policies on the range of socio-cultural and religious practices, specifically geared towards the oppression and restriction of women, is visible in the patriarchal social structure of the society, as depicted in the novel. With the exception of Naghma and Kaneez, no other female character is educated in Typhoon. The
novel does not refer to any educational opportunities or significance of education in women's lives, with women dependent upon men for their socio-economic needs.

Conclusion

Thus, feminist analysis of the selected texts reveals that women in Pakistan and Afghanistan live their lives in subordination to men. They, as depicted in these novels, are "the incidental, the inessential, and the Other, they are the subjects and “the Absolute”" (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. xiv). In these societies, as the novels demonstrate, gender is embedded in all institutions; therefore, the spaces for women and men are demarcated. Cultural norms and traditions in such societies allow men to occupy 'the public space', while women are confined to the 'private space'—that is, home and household. There are various strategies which patriarchy exercises to control and subordinate women, such as associating family honour with the woman's body and regarding women's modesty as the highest virtue. Being the custodian of family honour, which stays safe if females remain obedient, becomes the main reason to impose purdah upon them, keeping them segregated and restricted from the public sphere. The dependent and subordinated status is imprinted on the minds of women to the extent that they grow up with the consciousness that their social existence depends on their male relatives, and being self-reliant and independent is equated with being immodest and as going against the honour of their family.

Both novels take patriarchy as one of the central issues and present it as a social disease threatening the peaceful coexistence of men and women in society. Patriarchy assigns dominating roles to male members in these societies, who are regarded as superior to women, pertaining to mental as well as physical abilities, and hence have the right to control domestic, social and political spheres. Men in these societies take it as their inherent and legitimate right to control the lives of women, oppress their freedom to choose and decide, and even use violence to maintain their dominating position. This patriarchal thinking shapes women’s lives, with females in such circumstances conditioned to accept this situation as the norms and traditions of patriarchal culture in the socio-political system. They accept their subordinate roles and take it as their duty to obey men and facilitate them in carrying out their dominance and ruling positions.

Cultural traditions and the cultural interpretation of religion in both the patriarchal societies of Pakistan and Afghanistan make violence against women a cultural norm, and so it is a commonplace matter in their daily lives in the form of domestic violence. According to bell hooks (n. d.), women who are rebellious or who dare to show any degree of resistance or challenge are punished and victimised. Hence, patriarchal culture, patriarchal religious interpretation and patriarchal State policies collectively establish social conditions whereby women are marginalised and made vulnerable to abuse.
The novels set in Pakistan and Afghanistan argue that multiple forms of violence in these two regions stem from the alliance of patriarchy with various structural factors, such as culture, religion, State policies and law, as well as economic and educational opportunities. Thus, as narratives of confession, these two texts authenticate the truth, presented in the form of fiction.

References

Hashim, I. 1998. 'Reconciling Islam and feminism.' In C. Sweetman (Ed.), Gender, religion and spirituality (pp. 7-14). UK: Oxfam GB.


Religion & Patriarchy in the Fictions of Shahraz & Hosseieni


Dr. Munazza Yaqoob is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of English, Female Campus, International Islamic University, Islamabad. As Founder & Director of Critical Thinking Forum (CTF), she is engaged in a project titled Consciousness-Raising of Pakistani Women on Contemporary Academic and Social Issues (2015-2018) which is being carried out in collaboration with Department of State, US Embassy, Islamabad. Her research interests include Comparative Literature, Post 9/11 Literature, Peace Studies, Literary Theory, Ideology and Literature, Cultural Studies, and South Asian Fiction in English. Dr. Yaqoob completed her Post-Doc in 2016 at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, USA.