

## **Hypatia and Zenith: Challenging the Power Dynamics of Gendered Roles**

### **Abstract**

*To examine how individuals resist the gendered power play and inequality by doing against the prescribed roles, this study compares two real-life characters a) Hypatia and b) Zenith Irfan presented in their biopics: Agora (Spanish-English) and Motorcycle Girl (Pakistani/Urdu) respectively. For analyzing the characters, I use a post-structuralist feminist theory of power. The paper concludes that the everyday resistance of these two characters, one Hypatia living in 4th-5th century Alexandria and the other Zenith Irfan, living in Pakistan in the present day challenge the o the power dynamics of gendered roles make them agents for change in their societies. Hypatia urged women to start studying sciences, while Zenith inspired many women to ride on a motorbike to enjoy the freedom of traveling and break the stereotypes and taboos associated with women's mobility on roads as drivers and motor bikers from which Pakistani women suffer.*

**Keywords:** *Power, Gendered Relationships, Gender Roles, Resistance, Agency*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The war between the sexes has historically been a part of human life. From the earliest accounts, we have known the differences between men and women defined by some general physical differences of both sexes translated through norms, cultures, traditions, religions and social structures, thus providing certain 'gender roles'. How a person should behave, think, move in society or generally live according to their sex has been a significant pattern of life in human societies. That is why Simone De Beauvoir (1953, p.301) writes in her work "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" to show how the society develops individualistic characteristics especially the women in an unequal way. This means that it is the society that develops certain notions of women, which keeps her dependent, and cause oppression for her. This gender inequality is analyzed in the characters of

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Hypatia and Zenith Irfan who belong to the 4th-5th century's Alexandrian society and contemporary society of Pakistan respectively. In the two biopics, "Agora" (2009) and "Motorcycle Girl" (2018) of these two real-life characters; Hypatia and Zenith the lives of these two women is depicted which explained how they strive hard according to the circumstances and context of their time. Although the literature explains that the depiction of Hypatia is more representative of the cultural views during the time it was produced, rather than of the 4-5th centuries. However, I intend not to explore the historical accuracy of the events being filmed but rely on the on the two characters' characteristics (presented in the biopics), which have enabled them to resist the prevalent gender norms and roles of their respective societies. This paper is different in that its analyses and compares the biopics of the two women (Egyptian/Pakistani) who highlight the fact that gender roles and societal treatment are based on the power play. According to Foucault the power play between sexes happens due to the defined patterns of living by the power structures. In this paper, the analysis explains how through soft means, use of manipulation and/or brute force the power is exercised to make women do , act or live and /or adopt certain gender roles which are defined by the power structures of their times , i.e. Church, Private firms, peers, and family as well. Its novelty lies in its explanation of how women's everyday resistance through soft means can reshape gender roles. It does not look for the authenticity of the historical events captured in the films yet it only relies on the two characters' characteristics (presented in the biopics), which have enabled them to resist the prevalent gender norms and roles of their respective societies. Thus, the paper presents how the two characters tackle a softer aspect of being a woman to the harder core issues as well. It also focuses on why and how the structures of power use their apparatus directly and indirectly in individuals' lives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature explicates that many women have risen in their times to resist the power dynamics of gendered roles created by their respective societies. There is a need to understand the power dynamics that affect gender roles and role distribution in an uneven and unequal term. Power dynamics generally refer to the way different people or groups interact with each other and where one of them is powerful than the other one. However, there are contrasting views about power within feminist philosophy. However, relying upon Foucault's definition of power, one may need to understand that "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978, p.93). This conceptualization rejects the notion of an outright control over someone's behavior.

In Pakistan, many films like "Bol", "Verna", "Aurat Raj", "Dobara Phir Se", "Khuda k Liye", "Cake" and "Society Girl", explain women's issues and women's inferior status and dependent position in the society. Some of these films challenge the patriarchal system and speak about the hushed voices of the women living in

Pakistan. In the history of Pakistani cinema, only a few biopics of real women characters have been filmed like **Ek thi Marium** and **Motorcycle Girl**. Ek thi Marium is the story of a pilot Marium Mukhtar, whereas Motorcycle Girl is the biopic of a middle class first-ever Pakistani female motorcyclist who aspires to travel across Pakistan on her bike.

The scholarship concerning the core topic explains that resistance happens when the gender is understood as a performativity along with sex and sexuality which means that the regulative discourses do impact the construction of gendered or sexed subjects in Foucault's sense (Butler, 1992). On the other hand, Allen (2018) has mentioned that the resistance of the domination of unjust power relations like sexism, racism, class oppression is needed as Butler suggested to not only escape the gendered roles but to create a social and political identity as well. Political identity refers to reclaim, and/or transform previously stigmatized accounts of group, or one's own sense of self, community or group. For example, in Pakistani film Bol the character of Zainab utters a few words in the last scene of the film which reclaims women's right to their choice for having a child or not. She kills her father Hakeem Shafahatullah who was a conformist, fatalist, pessimist, dissembler, mentally-sick person, having a retrogressive and Islamically distorted view of life. This kind of portrayal of female character explain that the "discursive deviation" and the "performative protests" does create a discourse, which not only create resistance but also allow individuals particularly women to "escape from the power and domination".

The available literature also reveals that there are various forms of power which are discussed by Gramsci as "war of maneuvers" (1992, p. 238) and Althusser as "repressive state apparatus" (Althusser, L., 2006) control and subjugate people. However, to govern bodies power position of an individual really matters. Post development feminists discuss Foucault's concept of governmentality in relation to women's power position and the power play occurs by utilizing various forms of power dynamics to control bodies. They consider that the power play that is there "omnipresent" in Foucault's sense (1990)", in all kinds of social relationships, is coming from "everywhere" (ibid.1990) and a single institution or a group cannot be blamed for the subservience of individuals. However, the role of media as a knowledge production system is very important. The biopics of the individuals at a certain point in time does create influence. In this way, media being the fifth pillar of the state has a strategic role in the game of power relations within a social formation (Bingham, 1999).

In contrast to Butler, Mackinnon (1989, pp.104-105) states that in fact in a gendered social system where women do not escape the "meaning of women" how can resistance be possible in real sense. Due to this response of her, many post-

structuralists feminists criticize Mackinnon for completely denying women's agency and their ability to resist. However, many films portray those female characters where women keep on reproducing womanly notions and characters. Like the Motorcycle Girl, the grandmother of Zenith keeps on asking her to enroll herself for a vocational course to learn sewing and stitching so that people will know that she is a home-maker. Here she sets an example of the women who do not escape the meaning of women whereas, other women like Zenith make a rational choice and call off her engagement when her fiancé tries to middle in the way of her dreams. Davies (1991) suggests that the women's agency and resistance are possible when the individuals make "rational choices" by comparing the discourses and power structures available at a point in time. She also said that sometimes the rational choices accompany the desire also which is held under a particular discourse or discourses. This study extends the findings on the same debates by pointing out that individuals can challenge gender inequality. Hypatia and Zenith 's case present how these two characters challenge the available notions of gender norms and gender roles provided by the powerful structures within society.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For analyzing the characters the post-structuralists feminist theory of power is used. According to poststructuralist feminism, women are "subjects". These subjects interact with the society not as "passive beings" but as "conscious and knowing subjects" due to their knowledge, discourse, and power that they have in the "social sphere". They can do so by creating the "micro-practices of resistance" and discourses, and by using the technologies of power (social media, digital media, etc.). This theory helps to identify and analyze how Hypatia and Zenith adopt certain micro-practices of resistance to challenge power dynamics of gendered roles. It helps in realizing that "institutionalized" or "objectified" discourses interpellate individuals as "gendered subjects" necessarily are not adopted by all who reject the "obviousness" of these discourses. It helps in realizing that "institutionalized" or "objectified" discourses interpellate individuals as "gendered subjects" necessarily are not adopted by all who reject the "obviousness" of these discourses. They do not tend to perceive that reproduction of those practices, patterns or arbitrary regulations is necessary ( Glapka, 2014, pp. 32-35).

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The paper presents the qualitative analysis of the two women characters Hypatia and Zenith by analyzing the two movies; *Agora* and *Motorcycle Girl*, which gives the account of these two women who become the symbol of resistance and proved as agents for change in the society as well. The paper used the Feminist Poststructural Discourse Analysis (FPDA) as conceptualized by Baxter (2003) to analyze the accounts of the two women characters; Hypatia and Zenith.

According to Baxter (2008, p. 1-5) FPDA is concerned not to underpin the dichotomous relationship of powerless and powerful but it is concerned with how an individual's position or status shifts from powerless to powerful or vice versa. It really has helped to study both women characters. Thus, it argues how "female subject positions shifts or multiply located even within the same context, or event and how the speakers or the individuals keep on fluctuating between the subject positions on a matrix from powerlessness to powerfulness" (ibid. p.3). So, this analytical tool was used to examine two women characters and their subject positions where they have been powerful at a given time and turned out to be powerless at another time.

The FPDA has been worked out at two level "connotative and denotative as applied by Barthes (1973) and used by Baxter in her work (2003, p.2-4). The denotative level analysis examines the explicit language, events happening in the movies while the connotative level analysis underpins the implicit deep rooted power dynamics of gender roles shown in the two characters' biopics. Since in film studies researchers usually do an extensive denotative and connotative analysis by selecting various texts and explaining signifier, signified thoroughly. I hereby, for this paper, uses the same, however rely on some of the dialogues, and scenes captured in the two movies. Studying dialogues (the text, verbal and non-verbal) helps me to identify the "actual and social forms of social organization" as well as the "social and political consequences which are defined and contested" (Weedon, 1997, p.21; Glinka, 2014, p.35).

At first, Hypatia and Zenith's positions within their contexts are studied thoroughly because FPDA asserts that no subject can be "powerful" or "powerless" instead there remain "the continuing interplay of discourses "competing discourses" based on the subject's position within their respective context and "social sphere"(Baxter, 2003). Secondly, I have studied the gender differences which are found in the societies of these two characters by relying upon the analysis of the language because "language constructs conflicting subject positions which become labelled as gender differences" (Simpson, 1997, p.204; Glapka , 2014, p.37).

Lastly, the characters' symbolic resistance is analyzed by studying their different varying positions to realize whether it was emancipation or transformation which helped them to resist and how did their transformation caused competing discourses to create a negotiated softer version of discourses. It is done because FPDA does not consider the varying positions of women over time as "emancipation", instead it is considered a "transformation". The proponents of FPDA like Butler (1990), Bicholtz (1999), and Baxter (2003) believe that earlier women's voices have been "silenced and marginalized and women negotiated by drawing upon available competing discourses to create positive versions of the discourses".

## DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

The film presents Hypatia explains that she is an astronomer and scientist of the 4th-5th century in Alexandria, Egypt. She is an only child of her father brought up as a son who receives good education and enjoy a great deal of independence being a respected scholar in Alexandria. She teaches students who are mainly from aristocracy. Among those students is Orestes who later on converts to Christianity and becomes the Roman governor of the province of Egypt.

The opening scenes depicts Orestes, publicly showing his affection for the scholar. While, there is another person who has in secrecy affection for Hypatia, her slave named Davus. With the rise of Christianity in the city, Davus accepts the new faith and participate to destroy the "Serapeum" library with the Christian mob. At night, he comes back and seduced Hypatia. Upon this, she frees him by removing her slavery band.

Meanwhile, Hypatia set aside the advances of Orestes but remained his friend and advisor years after when he became the Christian Prefect of Alexandria and Hypatia was not permitted to teach. Being the Roman governor of Alexandria, he does not give importance to the orders of Bishop "Cyril" and seeks for Hypatia's suggestions which makes the Bishop furious.

The city where once the Jews, Pagans, and Christians lived together becomes a battleground. The orthodox Bishop Cyril and his followers, being the dominant faction in the city, keep creating friction among the groups. In order to gain greater control, Cyril first tries to keep the Jews out of his way and then Hypatia - due to her hold over Orestes and as a free woman of science and an atheist. Orestes and Synesius, former student and currently bishop of Cyrene, comes to help Hypatia (re-opening of her school) on the condition that she become a Christian. Declining the offer of accepting the faith, Hypatia is captured by some Christians and is humiliated while Davus ends up killing her to save her from more disgrace and pain of stoning and being skinned alive.

On the other hand, Zenith Irfan is the first female motorcyclist to ride across Pakistan. Apart from this, she is working in a telecommunication company "Telenor" to meet the family's basic needs. The film sets her story showing that she is part of a female headed household and has been suffering from various social and financial issues. She loves to ride on the bike because her deceased father had a dream to travel around the world on his bike. He was only 34 when he died, so Zenith decides to fulfill her father's dream and requests her fiancé to allow her to travel from Lahore to Khunjerab pass in Gilgit-Baltistan in 2015. Her fiancé permits on the conditions that she would never again go on such a trip and she agrees. When she is close to Khunjerab pass, she starts talking to her father, in her imagination, loses her balance

on the bike, falls down and strikes her head against a large stone. She remains unconscious for a few days and then recovers. Upon recovery, her fiancé asks her to come back, prepare herself for wedding day, and leave her trip unfinished. She refuses and calls off her engagement by giving back her engagement ring. Later, she reaches the Khunjerab pass. The community people admire her a lot and national and international media covers her trip with a positive note.

The denotative and connotative analysis of the characters of Hypatia and Zenith has been explored with respect to their positions, their difference from other women and the symbolic resistance patterns, to underscore how both women have challenged the power dynamics of gendered roles. In order to do this the researcher has utilized this the poststructuralist stance discussed by Foucault, (1984), Butler (1992) and Baxter (2003).

According to Baxter (2003), each individual's varying position fluctuates between powerful and powerless continuum which is found in the characters of Hypatia and Zenith. The powerlessness of the characters is shown in a few events. It is gathered that the two women characters in a few events have become powerless. For instance, Hypatia becomes powerless when Davus seduces her. On the other hand, Zenith's powerlessness is presented in a scene when the van driver bullies her on her way to office. Both of these women share the softer aspects of being women. Both characters remain silent and do not resist at that time.

According to positional model theorists of power Etzioni French & Raven:

The events captured in the film show that in a patriarchal society where father is the bread earner and care taker of the family, Zenith and her family has gone through difficult times financially as well as socially. For this reason, she misses him at every step of her life.

The denotative analysis of the characters' position within their contexts also has made this to realize that both of the characters have a certain kind of powerful position as well. Hypatia's powerful position lies in the fact that she was the daughter of Theon "the director of the museum, while Zenith's powerful position lies in the fact that she was feeding her whole family by earning money at her job and also paying her brother's school fees. Her role as a breadwinner in a Pakistani culture has enabled her to make independent life decisions. However, she misses her father at every step of her life because female-headed households are perceived as vulnerable in the society due to their lack of financial resources or unavailability of traditional family support system (Mohiuddin, 1989, pp. 759-760; Khalid & Akhtar, 2011). In addition, Pakistani society is patriarchal in nature and fathers are given more importance in family life. For example, thea few scenes capture how Zenith's grandmother talks sadly about them as "bin bap k"(fatherless). Such kind of language interpellates

individuals to construct a negative image of their self as helpless, weak, insecure etc (Monahon ,1997; Kasur & Munir, 2004)

The connotative analysis of the position and status of both characters explains how other women remain invisible in the film except in a few scenes which depicts the distribution of the gendered roles within Alexandrian and Pakistani society. Hypatia is visible at many significant and important forums like at the academy, library, a gathering of senators, at a sea trip with Orestes etc. Similarly, Zenith is the only woman riding a bike. No other women are visible, either in the historical scenes or during Zenith's road trip.

Hypatia's visibility at public spaces is only been appreciated when her father is alive, and Zenith's mobility is also not appreciated by her grandmother many times in various scenes. The grandmother expresses her view that Zenith's father's absence is the only cause of her untraditional bold and adventurous nature. Due to this, she used to miss her father at every step of her life because relatively female-headed households are perceived vulnerable in the society due to their lack of financial resources and unavailability of traditional family support system where father holds family together (Mohiuddin, 1989, pp. 759-760; Khalid & Akhtar, 2011). Thus, both Hypatia and Zenith have gone through difficult times after their fathers' death. Hypatia was given a tough time by the ones who hold power. She was asked to stop teaching, and to stop her explorations as well. This explains that the status she enjoyed as an astronomer, teacher and scientist was very much related to her father's position and not because of her personal characteristics.

Hypatia and Zenith's denotative analysis explains that both women have womanly traits of being passive. However, the connotative analysis of the same explains that both of them remain quiet or passive due to the normativity attached with them. The normative position of Hypatia being the daughter of the director of museum let her not highlight how Davus seduced her. Similarly, Zenith remained passive when her colleague made fun of her love emotions due to the concept of honor and shame attached with women in Pakistan (Haque, 2005).

Thus, the connotative analysis illuminates that both have presented the very womanly trait of being passive. This also shows weakness as being a woman who shares the very softer aspects of the common women. This aspect of them do show that they also have adopted some of the gendered patterns which have been prevalent in their respective cultures and societies.

Another similarity found in both of the characters is taking up their "rational choices". Hypatia wished to explore the world of stars and their movements while Zenith became "a motorcycle girl". It is due to their rational choices which means

“adopting a way to the actions, while establishing an analytic base from which it is possible to process in making claims about the world” (Osborne, 2005; Driscoll & Kreok , 2012). Thus, both of the characters are clear about their “preferences in both complete and transitive manner”(Osborne, 2005), also they know what are the options for which they must go for.

Hypatia's rational choice was to study astronomy and believe in " philosophy" because the religion, which was followed by most of the people in her society was misinterpreted and did not allow her to ponder upon the planetary objects even, considering pondering "a sin". Whereas, Zenith was committed to being a motorcycle girl not just to go easily to her office or avoid bullying but because she wanted to fulfill the dream of her deceased father who wished to plan a ride from Lahore to Khujaraab pass. She considered that her choice is rational because "what if she is not a son", she was her father's daughter "papa ki beti" and she could compete with any kind of prevailing gendered notions or gendered differences to fulfill her dream. According to Davies (1991), individuals used to take various steps to fulfill their rational choices.

Both characters come across as committed and devoted beings who did everything dedicatedly. The denotative and connotative analysis of Hypatia's character as a dedicated scientist is found in many scenes of the film where she concentrates on her research work while rejecting Orestes's advances which signifies her character as unusual while denotative and connotative analysis of Zenith in the office and pertaining to work behavior explain that she was a hardworking and dedicated woman who has prepared her presentation for a proposed project with utmost dedication. She has a brilliant mind, and used to think differently, emotionally, and express her ideas fearlessly. She puts up her presentation in a nice fashion and ended up with a theme “Step ahead! Do what you want! “Barrhao Qadam! Karo Jo Tum Chaho. " This led her boss to appreciate her work and ideas and her brilliant idea was approved by the project team and became the theme for the product of “Telenor” (a telecommunication company's monthly offer for the customers).

Another similarity between these characters is their assertiveness regarding the completion of their dreams and aims. In Hypatia's life the gendered power relationship between owner-slave, statesman-general public, leader-soldier, religious scholars-believers, and followers were present while in Zenith's life the gendered power relationship between boss-worker, society/public-individual, Fiancé -fiancée, family- individual were present. The power relationships were found interrelated and complex, causing subjugation and repression.

Hypatia has rejected the gendered dichotomy of men as admirer and women to be at their service, the men as rulers and women as dependents. Hypatia rejected the gendered role distribution which has been accentuated by Bishop Cyril that “a woman

must submit to men and must not enjoy authority over a man. In this way, Hypatia has not conformed herself to gendered relationships of power and control and devoted herself to study sciences which is considered a sin. Similarly, The denotative analysis of the gendered relations or gender roles which Zenith has challenged includes the gendered role division of male bread earner by started earning for her family and challenging the power dynamics of those (the van driver and the men on the roads) who have been considering her a “sexualized being”.

The analysis explains that Hypatia teaches both Pagans and Christians. The film’s opening scenes show that pagans and Christians did not have good relations. Instead, the believers of Iamblichus were holding power and ruling Alexandria. Later Christians gathered power, destroyed the library and overthrew the pagans. Christians considered their faith or ideology to be dominant and the one that must be followed by all, including Hypatia. This was so because Hypatia believes in philosophy and she has embraced original Neoplatonism formulated by Plotinus.

The knowledge, which Hypatia promoted, was regressed by the repressive state apparatus in Althusser's sense (2006) that include the use of brute force to subjugate people or to control them. For Christian believers the questioning or wondering about how different planets work, or arguing about their axis, rotation or anything else is like ‘judging God's creation as a sinful thing.’ Similarly, most Christians believed that considering ‘Earth as a Sphere’ and looking for the facts of the universe was like ridiculing God and intervening in God's work. At that time, only Hypatia was indulging in this so-called ‘sin’ so she was the only person considered ‘dangerous’ and given punishment. She was silenced and her voice was muted because she was not serving the interest of the power structures at that time.

On the other hand, the people who were in authority like Zenith's boss and her fiancé tried to suppress her. Her boss asked her to not come on the bike because his client "Sheikh Sahab" has reservations regarding her riding a bike. Sheikh sahib’s attitude towards a solo woman biker was not different from the many other men of the society which shows the cultural and societal perception regarding women’s physical presence on roads. It was also labeled as western by him because a biker travels alone whereas culturally in Pakistan, it is appreciated to accompany someone while travelling as confirmed by the study of Tanaka & Muzones (2016). Her boss also said to her that in their culture riding a scooter is not appreciated, for a woman. He said, “You and I are part of a society and system, and we have to get our work done within it. That’s why tomorrow you will not come on scooter. “Aap aur main aik society ka hissa hain, or isky beech mein reh kar he sare kam karne hain. Isliye aap kal scoter pe nahi aayegi”.

In the same way, her fiancé many times asked her to abandon the idea of going on the motorbike on the trip from Lahore to Khunjerab, Pak-China Pass to fulfill the dream of her deceased father. He even called off their engagement upon hearing that after being injured she still wanted to continue her trip. She broke off her engagement and went to her destination. Zenith's motorcycle trip was very much appreciated on social media and thousands of people called her the "pride of Pakistan". Following her footsteps, a few women who were facing monetary issues started driving auto-rickshaws to make their living. Inspired by her, the state institutions launched various campaigns "women on wheels (2018)" and launched "pink rickshaw scheme" to encourage women to come out and to present a better image of Pakistan.

The analysis explains that Zenith was taken up as a symbol of resistance for breaking barriers, which were not only created by societies but were also created by the girls of her society themselves. Her account of the trip illustrates the possibility of gender sensitivity from the instances where many men including the chef of a hotel "dhaba cook" and the male rider (who saved her) helped her in reaching her destination. Her words, which she spoke to a gathering in a college illustrate that one-step, which each individual has to take is "overcoming the fears".

In comparing Hypatia's painful end with Zenith's successful account, it can be understood that Hypatia was given a painful death penalty "stoning to death" because the power structures were following a discourse where "women must submit" whereas, Zenith got recognition because her society was in the transformation phase where state structures have to abide by the global discourses of "empowerment and agency". Thus, her acts received the favor of the power structures because Pakistan is a signatory to various treaties like Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which bind the Pakistani state to provide favorable situations for women.

## **CONCLUSION**

The accounts and characters of Hypatia and Zenith prove themselves as "conscious and knowing subjects" due to their knowledge, discourse, and power that they have in the "social sphere". They were able to influence their social sphere by creating the "micro-practices of resistance" like Hypatia, by questioning the religio-cultural practices, while Zenith did so by negotiating with the competing discourses through using social media "technologies of power". Hypatia uttered her voice by saying "I believe in Philosophy" while Zenith voiced her wishes in her presentation by uttering the words; and then herself become the symbol of agency. Her trip encouraged Pakistani women to move ahead and do whatever they wish "Barrhao qadam, karo jo tum chaho". She fulfilled her wish and her father's only wish by overcoming her fears and by resisting the prescribed discourses and/or the very structures which create

hindrances for individuals. This is how Zenith and Hypatia have become "symbol of agency" and agents for change.

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