

BARGAINING FEMALE DESIRES: A CRITICAL STUDY OF FEMALE SEXUALITY AND PATRIARCHAL CONVERGENCES IN QAISRA SHAHRAZ'S THE HOLY WOMAN

Abstract

Focusing specifically on female desire, the present article explores the interplay of female sexuality and patriarchal convergences in, Qaisra Shahraz's, The Holy Woman. Various female characters in the novel are found to 'bargain their desires', either to please their men, or to buy a sense of acceptance within the rigid patriarchal structures of their homes. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargaining' is used as a model to understand how and why such women are, at times, forced to comply with male dominancy which perpetuates their already gender discriminated position in the society. Women are presented as 'objects of desire' by men, exploited according to their whims, passive recipients of male gaze and are denied the expressions of sexual desire in a male dominated world. This paper concludes that it is precisely through this 'bargaining' that female characters such as Zarri Bano, Shahzada and Kaneez are able to achieve a sense of agency but at a greater cost of emotional and sexual exploitation. The theoretical basis for this inquiry is derived from the postcolonial feminism and Islamic feminist scholarship pertaining to female sexuality in the context of Postcolonial Pakistani society.

Keywords: *Female Desire, sexuality, Patriarchal society, Marriages, Anglophone Pakistani literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Kandiyoti (1988) in 'Bargaining with Patriarchy' points out two systems of male dominance mostly prevalent in two separate geographical areas, one found in the Sub-Saharan Africa, and the other in the Middle East, South Asia. Furthermore, Kandiyoti explains that, "The clearest example of classic patriarchy may be found in the

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geographical area that includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan and Iran), and South and East Asia” (ibid, p.278). In order to elaborate the concept of ‘classic patriarchy’, Kandiyoti outlines certain features of societies such as Pakistan where generally a classic patriarchy prevails. These features include:

- The early marriages of girls into households headed by senior men.
- Young women are subservient to not only men but senior women of the house as well.
- Senior men control the lives of their women as well as junior men.
- Mother-in-law, by virtue of seniority attains authority over daughter-in-law.
- Romantic love is suppressed between youngsters to ensure male control. (p. 278-279).

Kandiyoti highlights how women living in areas under classic patriarchy survive within these structures, at times ‘bargaining’ their position with their men. She also notes the, “breakdown and transformation of patriarchal bargains and their relationship to women’s consciousness and struggles” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.275). As also pointed out by Kandiyoti, Pakistan falls into the category of societies where a classic patriarchal structure prevails. However, due to economic reasons young people are moving away from their combined households headed by their fathers to live in faraway places. This trend has to some extent broken the traditional agrarian patriarchal setups within Pakistani society. Shahraz’s fiction, in this regard, especially *The Holy Woman* serves as the best text where we can see a similar shift or the breakdown of the classic patriarchal structures. For example, young men move out in search of jobs and prefer to take their wives with them. Consequently, the mother-in-law is left with no daughter-in-law to exercise her superiority over.

Many cases can be found in Shahraz’s fiction where certain structures of classic patriarchy are clearly broken. For example Habib’s decision to move to the city for his children’s education was sought against the wishes of his father Siraj Din, a typical feudal patriarch. Similarly, Kaneez after her emotional struggle emerges as a mother-in-law who happily agrees to Khawar and Firdaus’s decision to live separately in the city. Not only this, she agrees to marry, being in her late 60’s, Raees, a neighboring landlord who is shown to long desire Kaneez. Even Habib just shortly before his death begs forgiveness from Shahzada for his undue cruelty. Sikandar is also presented as a liberal, educated modern man who does not believe in lying restrictions on his wife and allows Zarri Bano to work on her long wanted profession. Pakistani society is presented as undergoing massive changes especially in relation to the position of

women in the society. For example, Firdaus, Fatima's daughter insists on acquiring education and eventually takes a job as a principal in Girls College in the city. However, caught amidst this shift of breaking of patriarchal structures female characters pay the heaviest price through sexual and emotional exploitation by their men. They do emerge as stronger and successful women by the end of the novel but this is achieved at the cost of emotional bargaining and suffering on the part of various women.

Following from Kandiyoti's point, we will analyze *The Holy Woman* as a novel set in the patriarchal settings of classic patriarchy which eventually shows a breakdown of harsh male centered structures. This paper will demonstrate how women are considered the 'property of the male head of the family. These women at times comply with their men either willingly or by force which makes them equal partners in the perpetuation of violence against other women. Similarly female characters such as Shahzada, Zarri Bano and Kaneez 'bargain' their desires with men in different ways to buy a sense of agency, safety, and acceptance in the male dominated settings. *The Holy Woman* focus on the various female characters caught within the stifling confines of patriarchy. Their needs and desires are cruelly rejected and denied in the face of harsh male dominance. However, as the plot continues Shahraz shows a transformation in the mind-set of various characters and the emergence of a new generation of young men such as Sikandar and Khawar who display a rather liberal attitude towards their women. Shahraz achieves this by breaking certain stereotypes commonly associated with Muslims, specifically and the Pakistani society generally.

In the light of the above presented examples from the text, Shahraz shows the dissolution of the patriarchal order and the breaking of certain stereotypes resulting in more tolerant men with the hope of a promising future for women. However, this paper aims to reveal that it is through the emotional bargaining of female desire, from a lower position against their men that allows these women survive male oppression and gender discrimination. We argue and conclude that the dissolution of patriarchal structure manifests itself through the sacrifice of female desires as various women in the novel, from the position of being a daughter, wife and mother, comply and accommodate with the wishes and desires of their men. Their expression of desire of any kind is denied and on the contrary women are often captured as passive recipients and 'objects of male desire'.

We use Kandiyoti's term of *patriarchal bargain* to explain how women in Pakistani society generally and within Shahraz's fiction specifically compromise, negotiate and strategize their position, no doubt always from a lower position of power to cope with the oppressions faced by them. For example, Shahzada in *The Holy Woman* bargains with her husband Habib to comply with him in his cruel act of helping him marry their

daughter to the Quran, as part of her obligation and duty to her husband. However, she warns to never forgive him and further emotionally distances herself from him. We see this as a ‘bargaining within patriarchy’ on the part of Shahzada, from a lower position. Furthermore, in all the cases of such bargaining that will be discussed, later on in the paper, women always find such deals working against their desires, hence the title of this article, ‘Bargaining the Female Desire’. We use the phrase ‘female desire’ to mean women’s choice of how they wish to use their body as well as sexuality. It may include their desire to marry, have children as well as a wish to contribute in decision pertaining to domestic and non-domestic realms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lau (2006) focuses on the contemporary south Asian women’s writings with specific reference to ‘home’ as a domestic territory and its emotional interplay in the lives of Asian women. She rightly notes that:

As writers in English, South Asian women have also had to negotiate their way linguistically and culturally, and their protagonists are in turn often portrayed negotiating their ‘circuitous ways’ within their domestic households to gain positionality, power and influence, power and influence within their families and societies. (Lau, 2006, p.1101)

In the context of Lau’s observation, Pakistani Anglophone literature is replete with female characters who have no choice but to negotiate their position in their households governed by patriarchy. Similarly, almost all of the women in our chosen novel are shown to negotiate, and bargain their positions to save themselves from harmful consequences. Shahraz is a fairly new addition to the Pakistani Postcolonial Anglophone fiction. Her immigration to the UK at the tender age of nine and her consequent exposure into British culture along with education allowed Shahraz to fully encompass the huge difference in gender discrimination and oppressions women face in both of the societies. We do not naively mean to state that women within the British societies are free of all patriarchal oppressions as patriarchy still lurks around in its modified form within many developed societies around the world. For example, Barkty (1990) highlights the ways in which female body is still under a modernized version of patriarchal control within the Western society by being subjected to the rigorous routing of make-up and beautification. Pakistani society in this regard is no exception to the inherent, psychological, physical and emotional patriarchal control over the female body. Shahraz’s genius as a writer perhaps lies in the fact that she attempts to highlight the negative aspects of Pakistani society by exposing how vulnerable women are, how hugely they are discriminated against and how female body and sexuality is a mere toy in the hands of men. On the other hand, she is also

capable of maintaining her optimistic stance by creating characters such as Sikandar, Khawar, and Younus Raees whose tolerance, liberalism and care for women never fails to pleasantly surprise us. Kidwai (2011) makes a similar observation that:

The most engaging element of this novel is Shahraz's dexterous delineation of the newly emerging Muslim woman of our time-resilient, self-confident, action-oriented, and resourceful...occurring from her modern education and skills. Another important factor accounting for this phenomenon is the collapsing of the old order under its own weight, and accelerated by socio-political and economic forces unleashed by the late modernity and globalization. (Kidwai, 2011, p. 80)

Siddiqui (2011) also praises Shahraz's fiction for its concern for social issues aggravated due to political and feudal system in Pakistan. He further claims that Pakistani fiction challenges and, "tries to break many stereotypical notions about Pakistan. Pakistan is not only a land of fundamentalism. It is also a land of different kind of music, extravagant parties and of course cricket" (Siddiqui, 2011, p.188). In this context, Zari Bano, seems to be a perfect example to illustrate Shahraz's attempt to show to the Western reader that the object of their much fascination, 'veil' is not a limiting or confining women in anyways. On the contrary, as Imtiaz and Zubair (2011, p.12) aptly point out that, "Hijab acquires new meaning as a domain-marker; the veil was intended to assert spatial boundary but ironically it becomes the protagonist transcendence of the spatial boundary. As evident by the observations presented above, Shahraz makes a keen observation of how women within Pakistani society tackle and struggle against gender biased rules pertaining to their sexuality and desire.

As mentioned before, by female desire we mean women's desire to assert their control on their sexuality, for example, right to marry according to their wish. Before we embark upon a textual analysis of the interplay between female desire and male dominance, it becomes pertinent to present certain insights relating to female sexuality. Muslim female sexuality, especially within South Asian societies such as Pakistan, is an important domain which finds ample scholarly attention. Menon and Bhasin (1998) highlight the precarious and troublesome position of female sexuality in the following words:

Women's sexuality, as it had been violated by abduction, transgressed by force conversion and marriage and exploited by impermissible cohabitation and reproduction was at the centre of debates around national duty, honor and identity. The extent and nature of violence women were subjected to when communities' conflagrated highlights not only their

particular vulnerability but an overarching patriarchal consensus that emerges on how to dispose of the troublesome question of women's sexuality. (Bhasin & Menon, 1988, p.20)

As the above quote indicates, women suffered in the worst sense imaginable in the historical event of partition. In other words, women were first raped, impregnated and then their violated sexuality became a problem, a nuisance that had to be dealt at the national level. This conjures up the image of a tissue paper that needed to be disposed of after use by men. In fact, female sexuality during the colonial era of the pre-partition times, as presented by Ahmad Ali in *Twilight in Delhi* remains an arena keenly controlled, exploited and manipulated by men. Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* brings to surface the inherent sexual repression, sexual fascination and gender discrimination embedded within the fabric of Muslim culture of Delhi. Whereas women in this novel remain faithful to their husbands, seldom re-marrying and seldom venturing outside the confines of their purdah, men on the other hand are free to sexual adventures, indulging in infidelity yet asserting unquestioned control over female sexuality. This clearly indicates that female sexuality is not only controlled and appropriated at the domestic level but also appropriated at the national and at times international levels as Spivak rightly asserts:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the "Third World Woman" caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development. (Spivak, 1999, p.304)

Shahraz's Zarri Bano perhaps presents a perfect example of this 'violent shuttling between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development' as her modern and secular personality is made to shatter in the face of traditional conservatism. The basic aim of this 're-appropriation' of Zarri Bano was undoubtedly, as the paper will demonstrate, the control over female sexuality and the denial of female desire.

Other Anglophone writers of Pakistani origin have dealt with the issue of female sexuality and female desire in a range of different works. All of these characters exhibit an inherent desire to control their bodies and sexuality but fail in the face of patriarchal structures. Sidhwa in all of her novels *Water*, *The Pakistani Bride*, *Ice-Candy Man*, *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat* majorly deals with the treatment of female sexuality at the hands of men within Pakistani society. Her female characters such as Zaitoon, Ayah and Lenny, and even Feroza at crucial times in their lives are overcome with realizations that their bodies and sexuality are not theirs in

reality; rather they are at the disposal of their men and their families who, guided by social customs, control them completely. Just as Zari Bano is awakened to the harsh reality of female helplessness in the face of patriarchal constraints in the following words, “men are the true creators in our culture mother, they mould our lives and destinies according to their whims” (*The Holy Woman*, p.87), similarly the harsh reality also dawns upon these women that, within the patriarchal structures women are doomed to find loopholes through manipulations, bargaining and compromises.

Qasim in Sidhwa’s *The Pakistani Bride* controls Zaitoon’s destiny, his adopted daughter, and carves out her fate by marrying her to re-establish his long lost link with his past life in the Kohistani Mountains. He rejects his daughter’s desire to marry in the plains and uses her body and sexuality according to his own desire and needs. Ice Candy Man, in another novel by Sidhwa, of the same name, abducts, rapes, and sells the Hindu Ayah as a means of revenge under the guise of 1947 partition riots. He makes her change her religion, name and forcefully keeps her in the newly partitioned Pakistan by suppressing her desires. Zarri Bano is filled with a similar horror as her father, with great ease, exercises his control over her sexuality, exploiting her in the name of cultural traditions.

One striking feature in all of the above mentioned examples is the active suppression of female desire by men and the consequent female resistance in which they at times succeed but at the greater cost of emotional battles and sexual violations. In this regard, *The Holy Woman* presents an interesting example by highlighting how patriarchy manifests itself through subtle ways even in the lives of wealthy women apparently dwelling in magnificent houses such as Zarri Bano and Shahzada. Also, this novel allows an interesting interplay of patriarchal convergences with the bargaining of female desire as various women kill their desires in order to make their men happy or to save themselves from their wrath. It is precisely this ‘bargain’ of their desires for which they receive the titles of obedient daughters and dutiful wives.

ANALYSIS

From a distance, a black Shogun Jeep carrying two men wound its way along the dusty road. The driver, a tall man in his early thirties, climbed out the vehicle...Removing his sunglasses he scanned the scene in front of him with amused interest...His gaze strayed past the crowd to a horse tied to a minar tree. Near the horse, under the large green canopy of the tree, stood a young woman. The stranger’s eyes halted in their track. Dressed in an elegant black Shalwar kameez, a matching black chiffon dupatta was casually draped around her shoulders and over her hair, forming a very becoming

frame for her strikingly beautiful face. (*The Holy Woman*, p. 12)

The very opening scene of the novel *The Holy Woman*, as described above, is replete with the image of a female body being held under the scrutiny of male gaze, a woman being 'looked at' by a man, a woman totally unaware and oblivion of the male gaze. This active 'looking at' at the female figure by a pair of male eyes, perhaps unconsciously, sets the grounds for the objectification of the female body and sexuality. As the story of the novel unfolds, we come across a striking interplay of the objectification of female sexuality, denial of female agency, and a conscious attempt of the male figures to disregard and suppress the female desire to uphold their male supremacy.

The novel begins with the arrival of the above mentioned prospective groom for Zarri Bano, a young, university educated woman who is looking to get married. This seems a very surprising and untraditional way of allowing young people to meet before marriage in a Pakistani society, especially considering that Habib, Zarri Bano's father, is a feudal landlord belonging to a village in Sindh. The woman in question, Zarri Bano, is mentioned to be twenty-seven years old, again, another striking revelation to have a woman nearing her thirties and yet not married. Her rebellious spirit is also brought forward by her act of going to watch the village feat; a largely male dominated activity whereas Shahraz describes, "it was not common or socially acceptable for young women to join openly in all-male set of activities" (*The Holy Woman*, p.12). This young woman repeatedly comes across as a transgressive of all social norms and customs even not caring much about her bare head in public place to which her brother, Jaffar mildly reprimands:

Dearest sister, I wish you would make sure that your scarf manages to stay on your head when you are outside in public place. Look at your hair! It's everywhere! It is not good for a woman to be seen like this...It creates a bad impression. Not only of you, but of us and our father. (*The Holy Woman*, p.13)

Jaffar's remark about his sister's careless behaviour and its possible negative effects on the family's honor bring us to a realization that Zarri Bano is a woman belonging to a conservative and traditional feudal family of Sindh that is wealthy enough to afford their women an access to education and a relatively greater mobility. The little gestures of transgressing her set limits by Zari Bano, such as described above, are ignored and let off by the men of her family, father and brother. However, it is not far into the story that Habib emerges, with all his might, as a traditional feudal lord for whom women, including his beloved Zarri Bano, are nothing more than

‘commodities’ or ‘things’ to be owned and controlled. The main incident in the novel which establishes the strong patriarchal context is what we will term as the passionate expression of female desire. In other words, a woman effort to make her own assertion and claim to her sexuality. Zarri Bano has been through a long list of suitors and finally meets a man she truly desires and expresses her admiration for him. Sikandar, in return, ignores her when meeting her in the presence of her family. Habib is not only furious with Sikandar’s conceited behaviour as he expresses, “that conceited bastard was more concerned with biscuits than giving my daughter the respect and attention she deserves” (p.23). He is further afraid as well as jealous of the mesmerizing effect Sikandar is able to assert on Zari Bano, as also confirmed by Shahzada’s observation, “Did you not see, Habib sahib, the look in your daughter’s eye and her reaction as she met him. She had never looked like that before” (p.22). Shahzada’s observation confirming ZarriBano’s fondness and desire for Sikandar add to Habib’s growing anger, as he responds in a state of fury, “ Yes, I did’, he ground out. All the more reason for me to be more cautious.” (p.23). This sign of romantic association kindling between his daughter and Sikandar is clearly interpreted by Habib as a threat to the love and affection he shares with Zarri Bano. In the Shakespearean sense, this Cordelia would surely devote half of her love and care to her husband, after marriage. But the King Lear-like royal Habib is unable to stomach the thought of another man sharing his daughter’s love. He thereby decides to disown Zari Bano of her ‘object of desire, i.e. Sikandar and most importantly her ‘right to desire a man’.

The tragic incident of Jaffar’s unexpected death which closely follows the meeting between ZarriBano and Sikandar proves to be a good enough excuse for Habib who takes full advantage of the opportunity to prevent Zarri Bano’s marriage with Sikandar. After consulting with his father, Siraj Din, he decides to re-fresh a long lost tradition of making Zarri Bano marry the Holy Quran, thereby, turning her into a *Shahzadi Ibadat*, literally meaning a ‘princess of worship’ which translates as *The Holy Woman*, as the title also reads. This new role would forbid Zarri Bano to marry any man but to live her life in seclusion, devoted to the rigorous study of the Quran, as well as preaching to the masses. In other words, Habib’s cruel decision is sought as a desperate measure to curtail Zarri Bano and Sikandar’s blooming romance as Zarri Bano by that time has visited Sikandar in his home, without the consent of her father, and has given full approval of Sikandar as her future husband. Thus, Jaffar’s death comes at the crucial point in the plot which allows Habib to strengthen his weakening grip over Zarri Bano, denying her the right to marry and proving himself to be the master of her life as he had earlier told Shahzada, “I am the head of the family and I will decide what is good for my Zarri Bano” (p.23). Zarri Bano is hurled into one of the most painful and emotional conflicts of yearning for her ‘desired man’ as well being sacrificed at the altar of her father’s family tradition. This traditional practice is

entirely culture based with no religious validations what so ever. In fact Islam encourages women to marry and even remarry in the cases of widowhood or divorce. Female sexuality in Islam is channeled through marriage to ensure social stability and to reduce any threats to the purity of social order. Whereas Islam views female sexuality as, “a potentially dangerous weapon capable of causing great harm if uncontrolled”. Islam expects men and women to marry at the right time, to reproduce off-springs for the continuity Muslim race. Habib therefore rather than channeling his daughter’s sexuality through marriage, chooses to repress her sexuality by enforcing an anti-Islamic practice.

A close look at Habib’s relationship with Zari Bano reveals a strong father-daughter bond. Habib sees Sikandar as a potential rival in his love for Zari Bano and a threat to their bond of affection. In other words, Habib wanted to remain the centre of Zari Bano’s desire and when he felt Zari Bano replacing him with another male figure that Habib saw as an equally powerful in his own way to draw and claim Zari Bano’s love. Habib explains this fear to Shahzada in the following words:

He barely glanced at my Zari Bano, Shahzada! Men have been falling in love with my daughter since she was a teenager, where as he could not even be bothered to look at her properly. This man has the power to hurt my beloved daughter. I feel it in my very bones. (*The Holy Woman*, p. 23)

The above quote by Habib clearly indicates that Sikandar’s behaviour has been judged as proud, conceited and uncaring by Habib who feels angered at his lack of attention given to Zari Bano and thus considers him too proud for his daughter. However, a close analysis, as already mentioned, reveals the inherent sense of insecurity Habib experiences at the thought of Zari Bano being associated with another man. Not just any man, but Sikandar who is presented as equally powerful in masculine sense with a certain sense of honor, dignity and wealth that perhaps made Habib feel belittled. Thus, Zari Bano is treated like a commodity that needs to be transferred from the possession of one man into the possession of another. She is treated like an object which is fought over by two powerful men. Apparently, Zari Bano is given a choice to decide her own bridegroom, but in reality, it is Habib who decides her fate. A slightest flicker of appreciation from Zari Bano’s part is met with harsh consequences from her father who, as Zari Bano’s mother later confides in her, “your father prevented you from marrying Sikandar simply because he was jealous of him...He was afraid of losing you to him. He glimpsed something in your eyes that he had never seen before for any other suitor and simply couldn’t cope with it” (p.445). As evident from Shahzada’s remark, it was Zari Bano’s expression of desire, and assertion of her sexuality that fuelled Habib’s hatred for Sikandar. As a woman in a patriarchal society she had no rights to openly display her emotions for any other man

before her father. Being a woman Zarri Bano is certainly disadvantaged in a society that only expects shyness and passivity from women. Women are expected to be in the passive position of being the 'objects of desire' by their men and not in an active role of expressing their 'desire for' men, even in the case of choosing a marriage partner. Ironically, Habib's earlier remark only works to validate this observation as he feels angered by Sikandar's act of ignoring and not 'looking at' Zarri Bano. We find this rather interesting that a father actually wanted his daughter to be 'looked at' by man, which, in a way, again reinforces the female figure being 'the observed' and the male being 'the observer' alluding to in the opting quotation of the textual analysis.

On at least four different occasions in the novel, Zarri Bano is presented in a passive position of being caught by the male gaze, in a passive position of 'being observed' and 'recipient of male sexual desire'. In the opening scene as elaborated before, she is being observed by Sikandar while standing under a tree. The second incident comes a little later where on his second visit Sikandar again 'looks at' the sleeping Zarri Bano in her garden:

Zarri Bano woke with a prickly feeling of awareness that she was *being watched*. A tall shadow lay strewn over her body. Fully awake, her eyelids fluttered open and her gaze travelled over a pair of white linen trouser-clad muscular legs, to a broad-shouldered chest in a crispy starched shirt, and rested on the tanned handsome face in which a pair of cool grey eyes was steadily staring down at her. (The Holy Woman, p. 121)

The above scene fully alludes to the image of a woman objectified by male gaze and desire. Zarri Bano's physical position of laying down, and Sikandar's eyes '*staring down at her*' actively conjures the image of a passive female body helplessly caught and captured by the much attractive 'muscular legs and broad-shouldered' male gaze who by '*staring down at her*' symbolically reflects her inferior position in terms of gender, as well as a recipient of male sexual desire. This sleeping beauty is awakened by the 'prickly feeling' of male gaze (not a kiss as in the traditional Sleeping beauty fairy tale) which, in a way, re-affirms the notion of women as the passive objects of male gaze and sexual desire. The third incident again centers on Zarri Bano and Sikandar where Zarri Bano is asked to dance in a female gathering at her sister's wedding. Though fully molded into her new role, Zarri Bano dances at the repeated requests of Ruby quite unaware that Sikandar was also watching her, "sitting hidden in the shadows at the far end of the hall" (P, 248).

The fourth incident follows later on in the novel when Zarri Bano travels to Cairo and meets Ibrahim Musa. His ‘dark eyes on her face’ during the first meeting and on their second meeting the following day, he, “stared at her face, noting the attractive dimple suddenly peeping in her left cheek” once again brings whatever is visible of Zarri Bano’s veiled body as the centre of male gaze and desire. In fact another incident between the two occurs where Zari Bano is sitting unveiled in the study and Ibrahim Musa enters ill prepared to find Zarri Bano without her veil. The consequent encounter again causes Zari Bano to blush with shame as, “her back throbbled, imagining his male eyes roaming on it” (p, 203). Musa’s act of ‘objectifying the female body is re-affirmed by his confession to himself that, “having *seenher* without the veil, his eyes had sinfully learnt to appreciate what lay behind the black garment” (p.204). The reference here is clearly to the female body and Musa is engaged in an active process of ‘desiring the female body’ which is later confirmed by his wish to marry Zarri Bano. She is once again caught and captured as an object of male desire and her body is exposed and looked at, and ‘appreciated’ by Musa just as previously done by Sikandar. Interestingly, Habib suppresses, denies and rejects her the right to her sexuality and Sikandar and Musa both are engaged in the processes of sexualizing her body. Zarri Bano is thus reduced to level of a ‘body’ that is left to the whims and fancies of the various men in her life.

Throughout the novel, Zarri Bano remains the centre of male desire. All the men in her life, Habib, Sikandar and later Musa *see* her as an object of their desire. Whereas Habib being the father expresses possessiveness over Zarri Bano, the two suitors actively hold her the centre of their male sexual desire. It is worth noting that female desire finds little if no expression at all in this male dominated scenario. The only expression of sexual desire from Zarri Bano is found at the beginning of the novel, which is quickly thwarted by Habib which again works to highlight gender discrimination. In addition to this, expressions of romantic desire seem to be a prerogative of the men only in the gender discriminated Pakistani society. This is quite significantly highlighted in this novel through the romantic association of a male character named, Khawar. He is the only son of a village Chaudharani Kaneez who was widowed at young age. Khawar expresses his desire to marry Firdaus, the washer woman, Fatima’s daughter from his village. Kaneez is outraged with her Son’s fascination with Firdaus, whom she considers beneath their social status. In addition to this, Fatima is the same woman whom her late husband had desired to marry. This gave Kaneez more reasons to dislike both Fatima and her daughter. When Kaneez objects to his son’s marriage, Khawar resists and challenges his mother’s decision and accuses her of being proud and leaves his house as a way of protest, an option denied to Zarri Bano by the virtue of her gender. Khawar remains steadfast in his protest and refuses to ever return to his mother in case she continues to refuse his marriage with Firdaus. As Khawar is Kaneez’s only son, he succeeds to emotionally blackmail his

mother and persuades her to allow him to marry Firdaus. Zarri Bano is unable to challenge or resist her father in a similar way, as being a woman the possibility of leaving the house as a protest would have held negative connotations. Whereas Khawar's mode of resistance is seen as a bold, courageous act of manly stubbornness, Zarri Bano's act, had she chosen to similarly abandon her father's house, would surely have been interpreted as a shameful act of a lustful woman who showed no regard for her father's honor. Thus, Zarri Bano bargains her desire of marrying Sikandar for the safety of her home and her father's honor.

Zarri Bano finds herself caught between the external conflict of Sikandar and Habib as both try to influence, convince and persuade her in their favor. She also suffers from an internal conflict of desiring a normal life, wanting to settle down, and desiring to have children, "How would she ever be able to quell the ache of an empty, forgotten whom, the longing to cradle a child against her breast. I want children too, like other women, Allah Pak! She beseeched"(p.163). Again her maternal desire is bargained in the patriarchal world whose master is Habib.

Throughout the novel, Zarri Bano, Shahzada and Kaneez remain engaged in a maddening fascination for the various male members of their family. Whereas Habib, Siraj Din and Khawar do not hesitate in scolding, teasing and emotionally blackmailing them, these women however always show obedience and passive acceptance in the face of male dominance. Zarri Bano bargains her sexuality in return for upholding her family honor. Shahzada bargains her desire to save Zari Bano in order to save herself from divorce and the possible threat of being disowned. Thus she experiences an acute sense of helplessness in spite of her financial wellbeing. Her miserable condition is ironically highlighted when Shahzada compares herself with her maid Fatima and admires the relative autonomy with which Fatima is able to decide her daughters' marriage, thus highlighting her own powerlessness in the following words:

Fatima, I wish I was a fishmonger's wife...For then I could protect my daughter's interests. Here I am a Chaudharani, but I don't even have enough power in my little finger to save my daughter from the fate that is awaiting her. (*The Holy Woman*, p.75)

For Shahzada, her home becomes, as cited by Lau (2006), "As well as being a symbol of protection and order, home can, in negative life situations, become a concretization of human misery: loneliness, rejection, exploitation and violence" (Cited in Lau, 2006, p.1112). Shahzada becomes a prisoner in her own home, and her house

becomes a symbolic manifestation of male authority which captures and exploits her. Shahzada yearns to save her daughter by arguing with her husband but in vain. Habib's threat of divorce silences her into passive acceptance, "In the darkness Shahzada's eyes shone with bitterness and hatred. She knew, with chilling precision, what she had to do. She would stand by her husband and endorse his decisions...I am just a puppet, a mere worthless woman to do you bidding" (*The Holy Woman*, p. 71). Shahzada, by passively accepting to play her role of a dutiful wife, bargains her desire to save her daughter from male tyranny in return to save herself from divorce. Thus she bargains from a lower position against the powerful Habib and in a way perpetuates in the oppression against her daughter.

Kaneez, another female figure in the novel, is presented as village Chaudharani who was widowed shortly after her marriage. She was raped as a teenager and silently suffered the psychological damage to her personality. On discovering her bitter secret, her husband rejects and humiliates her. Her only source of support is her son Khawar. In her maddening possessiveness for her son she bargains her ego and falls on her knees before Firdaus to have her son back. She desires for her son to marry a girl of her choice but Khawar's insistence on marrying Firdaus out wins his mother's stubbornness. Kaneez is portrayed as a woman who is repeatedly rejected by and exploited by various men in her life including her late husband who wanted to marry another woman and only half-heartedly accepted Kaneez as a wife. In other words, Kaneez becomes a target of sexual victimization in her early life and later a victim of emotional rejection and isolation from her husband. Therefore, Kaneez falls into the helpless condition of being over possessive of her son, the only man in her life who returns her love and affection. In the light of the above scenario, Kaneez sees Firdaus as a threat to her relationship with her son Khawar just as Habib interprets Sikandar as a threat to his love for Zarri Bano. This mother-son and father-daughter complex runs parallel in the novel.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that, in both of the cases Zarri and Kaneez back out and bow before the male desire. As we have seen Zarri bargains her desire for Sikandar and accepts Habib's decision, and Kaneez also backs out and accepts Khawar's decision of marrying Firdaus. Both of these women had to give up their own ambitions in the face of male pressure. Interestingly, all of these women, Kaneez, Shahzada and Zarri Bano try to voice their opinions, express their desires and even offer logical explanations before their men. However, as highlighted it is men who hold a superior position in the bargaining process and they easily succeed in pressurizing these women in the name of honor in Zarri Bano's case, threat of abandon, in Kaneez's

case, and threat of rejection and divorce, in Shahzada's case. Therefore, these women easily succumb before male dominance for the safety of their homes, and relationships bargaining their desires and wishes in the process. It is here that female desires are bargained as women's need of safe homes, emotional support and the responsibility to uphold family honor scares them into humble acceptance.

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