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Emergent Sexualities and Intimacies in Contemporary Pakistani Women's Fiction: A Postfeminist Reading

Abstract

This paper presents a reading of contemporary Pakistani women's fiction with a focus on their treatment of the subjects of sex and intimacy. The textual nuances have been thematically presented to situate the argument that Pakistani women writers celebrate the intimate aspects of their lives. Without being disloyal to religious and regional sensibilities, these women are creating and nurturing breathing spaces for them. The data for the study comprises the works of two contemporary Pakistani women writers Maha Khan Phillips' Beautiful from this Angle (2010), and Saba Imtiaz's Karachi you're Killing Me (2014). For the sake of conducting narrative analysis, this study relies on postfeminism as a conceptual framework and thematic categories representative of the chick literature genre as a method. The objective of the paper is to bring forth alternative voices depicting the lived realities of Pakistani women, as opposed to the essentialist understanding of Pakistani women.

Keywords: *Sexualities, Pakistani Fiction, Women Writings*

INTRODUCTION

Pakistani literature in English has traditionally been very diverse in its demeanour. It has focussed on atrocities of partition, emergence of postcolonial identity, life in diasporas, and questioning of home-grown neo-colonial structures, concerning distribution of wealth, construction of gender identity, and the role of religion. We find gender mores and their realization in Pakistani fiction under the influence of cultural hegemony either in the guile of religion or by over-valuing orient; certain practices are justified in the name of 'Eastern' tradition. Gender segregation, arranged marriages, repressed sexualities, tabooing premarital or extra-marital sex, mass gender discomfort, dominant role of parents, or even for that matter grandparents in determining the course of sexual and married life of young adults, girls as *izzat* (family honour) than individual humans are recurrent themes in Pakistani women's writings. The female characters that emerge strong by virtue of being ideologically inclined to fighting for a feminist cause are typically presented as rising above socio-economic odds. A completely independent woman having control over all aspects of

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her life including love relationships, sexuality, and mobility is less explicit, however not non-existent in new millennium Anglophone Pakistani fiction. Writers like Saba Imtiaz, Moni Mohsin, Shazaf Fatima Haider, Maha Khan Phillips are creating bold female characters, convincing enough to live and talk about their sex lives, guilt free. This is how they are decolonizing gender as a category in the South Asian/Pakistani context. Through the analysis of *Beautiful from this Angle* (BFTA) (2010) by Maha Khan Phillips and *Karachi you're Killing Me* (KYAKM) (2014) by Saba Imtiaz, this paper investigates how contemporary Pakistani fiction writers are challenging the stereotypes of Asian-Islamic womanhood through the unconventional, yet realistic and independent portrayal of female characters. Such fiction is also characterised as chick literature[1]. Further, important to the dialectics of the study is the role progressive creative constructions can play in re-envisioning gender normality in Islamic Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tracing the Roots of Progressive Tradition

According to Rakhshanda Jalil, (2015) before partition, Muslim women like Rashid Jehan were writing progressively to expose the sexual hypocrisy of the people of India. In her collection *Angaray* (1931), she asserted that societies, religions, cultures, and political interests, all in one way or the other have been hampering the progress towards sexual autonomy and rights of women. Referring to Qudratullah Shahab, Rehman (2015) notes indignation, revolt and preoccupation of sex in the Urdu short story of the time. Sex is significant physically, socio-psychologically as well as religiously, so tabooing it based on Victorian morality is unfair. Modernist Urdu literary contributors like Sadat Hassan Manto and Ismat Chughtai have some very explicit references to sex and intimacy—her short story *Lihaf* is on lesbianism—considering it as a natural human instinct. Others had to camouflage[2] their treatment of sex by arguing that they are dealing with the issue in order to make people disapprove it. Pre-partition Muslim poets like Mir Taqi Mir, Hakim Momin Khan Momin, Mirza Ghalib also had erotic elements in their poetry which they never felt apologetic about. In Pakistan, middle class prudery has not allowed any latitude to modernist liberal values[3]. Despite secular outlook and disfavouring religious orthodoxy, Anglophone Pakistani writers could not present objective treatment of sex as a biological human desire and sexual empowerment of people throughout the literary history of Pakistan.

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[1] Chick literature is a contemporary genre of women's fiction where free, forward-looking female protagonists are at the center stage. The plot mainly revolves around their romantic and intimate lives.

[2] That any mention of sex being a taboo, the writers had to justify its inclusion by saying they are against these 'immoral' practices

[3] Generic understanding of the term 'middle class' as middle income group in given context and 'liberal' as tolerant of differences and diversity

Tariq Rehman (2015) in his book *History of Pakistani Literature in English* provides a thorough survey of Pakistani literature from 1947 to 1988. He is of the view that Pakistani literature in English could not live up to the standards of other literatures in English—for example, African or Indian literature—both in terms of expression and themes. Pakistani writings are replete with solecism and are insensitive to political realities around them. In the recent edition of his book, Rehman comments that the last two decades have produced more mentionable works than the previous fifty years. The roots of Pakistani literature in English lie in a liberal-antisocialist-intellectual tradition under the influence of Westernised bureaucracy who wrote in English. Among them, Ahmad Ali is considered as the pioneer of the progressive writers' movement in Pakistan, along with a group of liberal-democratic elite of the newly formed Pakistan in the 1950s. Under the umbrella of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) authors experimented in English following modernist tradition, but the majority of the works did not meet the literary merits of the English language. A notable female name of PWM is that of Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah whose works subtly treated existentialist absurdism, liberal humanitarianism, romance, pleasure and analyses of psychosocial realities of the 1950s Pakistan.

Zulfikar Ghose, writing in the 1960s, with the rise of the middle class in Pakistan, delineated the debates on, socialism, class discrimination, snobbery, exile, colonization, lawlessness, capitalism, and the Pakistani way of life. This all contributed in developing the 'Pakistani idiom' (Rehman, 2015). In the 1970s, religious fundamentalism, and far right nationalism flourished and the worth of English[4] declined. One of the most important female writers of Pakistani English fiction who started writing in the 1970s is Bapsi Sidhwa. Her work is characterised as unsentimental and realistic with a tinge of sensuality. She has delightfully described the Pakistani Parsi community in her works. Due to political instability, repeated periods of martial law, and Zia's Islamism, the environment was detrimental to good literature in the 1980s. The Iranian Islamic revolution of the 80s also had its influence on Pakistan with the censorship of any sexual content in literature and growth of a prudish mentality among the middle class. The few male writers were the main literary contributors, with no significant female writings dealing with romance, love or intimacy.

Religion and the Intimate Subject

The role of religion is important in concrete conceptualisation of the treatment of sex and intimacy in Pakistani literature. Islam has been (ab) used by religious orthodoxy to maintain control over people's lives, especially in the affairs where there is no

[4] English in general as a medium for education

theological verdict of righteousness[5]. Having said that, it is also a fact that the social identity of Pakistani female writers cannot be detached from their religious identity, that is Islamic Identity. Hence, it is important to trace what values and traditions they inherit from their ancestors and how they are reflected in their works. Fatima Mernissi (2001) debunks Western myths—framing Muslim women either as sex slaves in harems or recipients of violence—by providing pleasant and illustrious examples of Muslim women from the history, art and literature. She compares the concept of harem as it has been realised in Western and Muslim traditions. Harem in Arabic tradition means the place for women in the house, where men not belonging to the family cannot enter, whereas, in many Western realisations of harem through art and literature, it is a peaceful pleasure garden where there are orgiastic feasts happening with vulnerable nude women in inviting positions. This is especially how harem women are painted by Western artists[6]. In the Muslim harem, women are not powerless, poor creatures, but in fact, are furious and fight back; they are uncontrollable sex partners. Mesnissi points out, 'In both miniatures and literature, Muslim men represent women as active participants, while westerners such as Matisse, Ingres, and Picasso show them as nude and passive' (Mernissi 2001, p. 15)

The Muslim world is heterogeneous with diverse cultures, geographical conditions and economics, encouraging pluralism and freedom of expression. Throughout Islamic history, Muslim women have been expressive about their sexuality. Zulekha's attempt on Yousaf and its inclusion in the Holy Quran, although in condemnation, indicates that women in Islam have not been passive receivers of sex. This presumed submissive discourse is not limited to intimate aspects of women's life only, rather Muslim women in general are also perceived as sufferers at the hands of patriarchs. Islamic feminists and female scholars of Islam have successfully challenged all such notions relying on Quranic hermeneutics. Even the exile of Eve from Paradise has a less misogynistic version in Islam as compared to Christianity.

Not for reverse orientalism[7], but if we study Western philosophers like Kant, we discover relatively conservative views about women, to the extent that they consider women incapable of understanding sublime ideas. For instance, John Berger (1977) sums up West's treatment of women throughout history in these words: "Men act and women appear…Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (9). While on the other side of the spectrum Fatima Mernissi argues, "In 1920s, when Matisse was painting Turkish women as harem slaves, Kemal Ataturk was

[5] In Islam there is no definite verdict on many aspects of religious and personal life, and these aspects get manipulated by clergy to suit their version

[6] Several Western historians writing on the history of Islamic rule in the subcontinent have theorised on the concept of the harem. Richard Eaton and Patricia Crone are two examples.

[7] where orient uses the same apparatuses against occident that are used against them

promulgating feminist laws that granted Turkish women the right to education, right to vote, and the right to hold public office. As a consequence of those laws, which were to transform the entire Muslim world, no less than seventeen women were elected to the 1935 Turkish parliament" (Mernissi, 2001, p. 109)

In an extension to the same argument, according to Shereen El Feki: "there is a long and distinguished history of Arabic writing on sex—literature, poetry, medical treatises, self-help manuals—which has slipped out of sight in much of the Arab world" (Feki, 2013, p. 13). At present our, "sexual hibernation is just one element of a broader intellectual decline that gained momentum during the colonial period: since Bonaparte, we've witnessed a negative evolution of Muslim societies. Especially over the past half century, since the collapse of Nasserism and nationalism, our societies have been on the defensive in the process of closing in on themselves" (Bouhdiba 2012, p. 231). In a way the enforced sexual submissiveness paves the way for other forms of suppressions and authoritarian order (Reich 1973, p. 98).

As continuation of the same polemics in a Pakistani context, there is nearly no work available on the history, attitudes or development of sexuality in Pakistan. Among the very few available documents, Ibrahim (2016) has developed a discourse on issues related to gender and sex in Pakistani society. He is very critical of Islamic scholars like Ashraf Ali Thanvi and poets including Akbar Allabadi and Iqbal, on their unfair treatment of women that resulted in misogyny in Indo-Pak. He argues that there is a need of realising the fact that sexuality is not only about men; women also have sexual rights and desires, referring to the instances of marital rapes. Ibrahim also considers lack of sex education as one of the reasons behind the growing viewership of pornography in Pakistan. His work includes debates on sexual desire, masturbation, sexual hypocrisy, love, marriage and sexual identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a text analysis based inductive inquiry where the focus is to trace out postfeminist discursivities in selected Pakistani fiction, with an emphasis to highlight the depiction of sexualities and intimacies. A close reading of the texts is used as a method to come up with thematic categories representative of postfeminist literary texts. According to Faludi (1991), postfeminism is a backlash against feminism in which women are providing subtle critiques of feminism without getting involved in heavy theoretical debates. Post Feminists are reverting to those privileges that women had lost at the hands of feminism, including, celebrating femininity, female beauty, domesticity and men.[8] According to Smith (2005) feminism just focused on young

[8] The concept is still in its infancy; it can be debated what facets of postfeminist stance are doing what favours to women's cause. However, this is out of scope of this paper to complicate the argument on postfeminism

heterosexual white women. It did not cover many of the choices that women actually make in their everyday lives. Broadly speaking, literature created by women performs two functions; either it depicts strong female characters or deals with everyday reality of modern life. Women need role models that are relatable with their social reality; hence we find feminism and femininity both are redefined in postfeminist chick literature on these grounds. Such literature creates a community of women, who cross cultural boundaries and connect with other women based on shared values of freedom, choice and norms of popular culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In retrospect, when we analyse literary works—fiction—from Pakistan, there is a scarcity of critical or creative work available in the postfeminist tradition. However, in this new millennium, Pakistani Anglophone female fiction is keeping abreast with modern trends in literature. The works selected for this study, *Beautiful from this Angle (BFTA)* (2010) by Maha Khan Phillips and *Karachi You're Killing Me (KYAKM)* (2014) both are set in Karachi. Both novels have multi-layered plots with bold female characters, not very common in Pakistani locales, where they openly party, use drinks and drugs, discuss and date men and get involved in sex and intimacy outside marriage.

Some of the postfeminist-chick literature patterns that emerge in both works are party scenes; drinks and drugs; anti-extremist discourse; humour; consumerism; swear words, foul language; individualism replacing sisterhood, prominence of body image, fashion extravaganza, intimacy, dating, sex, love, marriage, and hunt for men. It is interesting to observe the treatment of these taboo terrains in a Pakistani context, where apparently the presence of strict moral code, promoted by religion, does not leave any space for living or penning down the pleasurable aspects of human life.

Sex and Sexuality

The female characters enjoy their sex life to the full without any guilt that is an outcome of middle class morality. Amynah sleeps with different men causally and sex throughout the novel is framed as 'just' a common human biological need. With Kamal, her boyfriend, "She gets out of bed and realizes that she is naked…Kamal rinses shampoo off his hair, oblivious to her presence. Amynah watches the suds slide down his body and feels a sudden urge to join him in the shower" (96). "It's been six hours and thirty-two minutes since I left your bed. Of course I'm missing you....I'd love the sound of your voice. It's throaty and sexy and perfect. Well Mr Khalid, you'll hear it plenty later, when we have phone sex" (41). Amynah's mother also had affairs that Amynah grew up observing. A member of the national assembly was a regular visitor of her mother. She was just nine when for the first time she encountered this. Mumtaz's sister Sophie also sleeps with different men. First she has a relationship with Amynah's friend Faisal and then with a wealthy businessman:

"Sophie is with Asghar Alam…Sophie has stripped down to her bra and is running towards water. Asghar follows as fast as he can, his naked belly wobbling" (229). The ease with which these women are switching partners is surprising in the Pakistani setting although it makes a bold statement on the possibility of it.

Saba Imtiaz's *KYAKM* is also full of explicit references to sex. Ayesha, the protagonist details her sex adventures with different men as a party girl: "I really want to meet someone NEW. Like, someone I don't feel ashamed about fucking" (9). In this book we find a discussion on details about sex. Ayesha unapologetically asks Saad about sexual activity with a girl he slept with. Saad calls her a starfish: "A starfish is a woman who just lies there, makes you do all the work. Like a starfish." (12). At the Karachi Literature Festival Saad boasts that he has had sex with most of the girls present showing that sexual adventures are portrayed as a social capital that add to your profile. The lead character Ayesha, upon seeing Jamie, the BBC reporter, convinces herself that she should feel happy that someone likes her. She expresses her urge for sex boldly: "I really, really need to have sex, to feel someone's body pressing against me other than the cat's. Make a mental note to procure morning after pills at the hotel pharmacy." (115). She even describes how she loved having sex with Jamie: "The sex was mind blowingly good. Perhaps it had been too long, or maybe it was the wine, or how absolutely romantic it felt to be unwrapped and laid down on a plush bed, but ohmygod. White men really do it better" (122). This sensual, desirous depiction of pleasure seeking by a female protagonist is a powerful alternative discourse indicative of postfeminist turn in Pakistani women's agenda of feminist cause.

Pakistani Party Prospects

Both the works present the party and nightlife of the city. Amynah the lead character of *BFTA* and Ayesha the protagonist of *KYAKM* are party animals. In Pakistan, there is a ban on public bars or nightclubs, so most of these sprees referred to in the novels are private events. We find the presence of a wide range of such elite parties in both novels, especially in *BFTA*: 'post-Ramzan parties', 'The Heart Centre's Black and White Evening', 'Ali Habib's Sadists and Virgins party', 'The Cancer Trust's Arabian Nights', 'Sindh Club Ball', 'Ozzy and Mehnaz's, 'Saints and Sinners Party'. The details that we get about these parties makes us feel that it's an insider's description, the one who really knows about the modus operandi of such events, and this is happening in Karachi, this is real, not a swank. These parties become rituals, reflective of the social class of the organizer. Various NGOs, hospitals and charity organisations host them, and themes and ticket prices vary accordingly. A notable aspect is that the girls take equal delight in drinks at these parties as boys do, which can be read as an effort to normalise free and frank description of alcohol consumption. This for a reader, not familiar with Pakistani locale, is very surprising.

A typical image that we get is of a Pakistani woman as a pitiable victim of patriarchy, devoid of any opportunity for pleasure. However, the fine details of the fun-centric parties in Karachi prove it otherwise. In *KYAKM,* it's not only the lead character, but her friend Zara also gets involved in the bash. They party as if their life depends on it. Along with pleasure, these parties are a way to socialise, make connections and meet potential partners.

Expression of Pop Culture: Consumption of Alcohol and Drugs

As an expression of pop culture, alcohol, cigarettes, and joints get frequent mentions in the novel. Most parties and nightlife in these works centres around them. People of all ages celebrate their freedom by drinking and dancing the nights away. Mumtaz in *BFTA,* who apparently is considered a simpleton, excessively relies on alcohol. Amynah, as a pro party girl, her body is accustomed to high levels of alcohol and drugs. Amynah takes care of Mumtaz as she is a novice on the party front. The soirees that take place on the beaches are full of all kinds of stuff: 'why don't we sit in one of the turtle pits and drink the bottle of red you brought…Turtle pits perfect for a drink or a joint' (12). The girls not only consume alcohol at parties, they also rely on bootleggers to deliver it to their doorsteps, which is indicative of addictive consumption of liquor, and a variety of beers, wines, and liquors are used by both Amynah and Mumtaz in *BFTA.* This comfort with booze mania may not be representative of all Pakistani girls, but it does establish, to some extent, a collective facet of female folk, where they do not shy away and assert their freedom. A common critique the creators of such texts have to face is on the issue of 'class'; that these characters are elitist, and do not connect with a common Pakistani woman. However, a complete denial of their existence would be no less a fallacy.

In *KYAKM,* the lead character Ayesha smokes excessively and utilizes female smoking as a tool to venture into the men's world. She takes a cameraman to task when he tries to film women who are smoking, and thrashes them saying that it's not pornography that they are curious about. There is also mass consumption of alcohol visible in the novel. The ability to consume large amounts of alcohol is considered as a symbol of elitism. If someone cannot handle drinking she does not belong to these galas. Since it is illegal to carry any type of alcohol without permit in Pakistan, we see characters making an effort to get away from the police, showing the level of involvement the youth has with alcoholic beverages. The sales of Murree Brewery, one of the local producers of alcohol, are ironically high considering Pakistan is a country where it is prohibited to consume alcohol for the Muslim population and the non-Muslim population needs a special permit to be able to buy, sell and consume alcohol.

Girls' Hunt for Men

One of the defining features of postfeminist chick literature is girls' hunt for men. In most cultures it is men who admire female beauty, fanaticize it, and make an effort to approach women. In contrast, in both these works we find instances of male beauty adored and sought after by females. In *BFTA,* Amynah describes her crush Kamal as sexy and longs to run her hand over his sculptured troso. Despite having an appreciation for physical appearance, it is not that looks and beauty are the only thing, these girls are appalled by, intellect is a key element that they are attracted to and they appreciate reading habits and the philosophy of men.

In *KYAKM*, it was difficult for Ayesha to stay without men. Ayesha's new year resolution was not to stay single. She gets ditched by a white guy and eventually marries her childhood friend Saad. Throughout the novel love and approaching men is not stigmatized. Ayesha describes her longing for Saad in these words: "For some reasons I feel like I'm going to cry…I just want to put my head on his shoulder and tell him how miserable I've been" (11). Later in the novel she is ensnared in the charm of a white man, whom she explicitly expressed her desire to sleep with, made effort to get him, and finally succeeded. At times in the diction of *KYAKM*, the reader feels as if men were overly sexualized, their bodies objectified and they are victims of the female gaze.

Dating Extravaganza

The female characters in both novels openly date the affiliations they develop over drinks at parties or elsewhere. These affiliations are shown to last briefly and these girls do not seem to have an issue if their partners have multiple affiliations. As a norm, relationships outside marriage are not acceptable in Pakistani religio-cultural settings. Thus, this liberty and the freedom being exercised by these girls is not very characteristic of Pakistani women. However, in *BFTA*, Amynah told Mumtaz's sister Sophie that Faisal has been with her and he is not a one-woman-man, which did not seem to bother her at all. Later in the novel even Amynah,despite knowing that Faisal has been with Sophie, calls him for her own pleasure. Dates get facilitated; in *KYAKM* Zara makes Ayesha meet Hasan by saying: "When was the last time you went on a date?" (31). Ayesha keeps on changing partners as Amynah does in *BFTA*. Ayesha very comfortably accepts and discusses her friend/lover Saad's dating scene. Along with facilitations and acceptance, we also find characters advising other characters on dating as Zara advises Ayesha not to get carried away: "Look, date a gora all you want, but please don't become a cliché" (93).

Conquest of Marriage

A general conception that emerges from analysing textual nuances of the selected texts is that both lead characters are uncomfortable with the concept of marriage. This

does not go by a common positive attitude towards marriage in postfeminist fiction. Amynah expresses her views about marriage: “No one stays faithful. That’s why Amynah has sworn never to marry and never to have children" (Phillips, 2010, p. 45). She is also weary of how men want their wives to be a superwoman who is able to seamlessly shift roles when required between a perfectly pious woman and an active sex partner: “Why are all men like this? On the one hand, they expect you to act like hookers in the bedroom. On the other, they want you to dress piously and touch their mother’s feet.” (100). Ayesha, in *KYAKM* reassures herself about not to marry: “I remind myself how much I love being single and not having to account for every second of my life to someone” (Imtiaz, 2014, p. 30). Riffat Aunty, the mother of Saad, Ayesha’s best friend cum lover, abhors the idea of getting married: “getting married and settling down…Where’s fun in that beta? Enjoy yourself. Travel. See the world. Maybe get married. Don’t have kids, they’re so overrated” (43). Ayesha mocks married females, saying: “Pakistanis, they’re fanatical in their devotion. They even cut their wrists to get their husband’s attention. And this is what even Pakistani TV dramas are portraying” (95).

CONCLUSION

These textual instances from contemporary Pakistani chick fiction disqualify the prevailing perceptions of Muslim women’s victimhood. Had it all been misogynistic and gloomy, we would not have examples of Muslim women from history, or from the contemporary literature exercising their freedom. The versions of modesty and freedom vary, not only between cultures, but also within cultures. Pakistani women living under Islam are equally open to modernity and social evolution taking place around them. If not entirely successful, they are striving sincerely to reach there; their struggle should be acknowledged rather than paying undue attention to politically inspired Western discourses which objectify them. Pakistani females are humans who love to be loved and are sensitive to the value of emotions, intimacy, and desire. They take pride in their beauty and like to express it. They cherish male attention more than constantly whining about male gaze, with the understanding that there are religious and cultural restrictions that they are supposed to abide by, but they are equally free to reinterpret them or flaunt them. Religion is a matter of personal choice and freedom—not a communal thing. Pakistani women have been and are learning to live a joyous personal life, sticking to their individual worldview of righteousness without disrespecting any religious sentiments of the place. A pluralistic Pakistan cannot be achieved if the voices of dissent are side-lined or silenced.

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