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# Gynocritical Study of Muslim Women in Partition Literature

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## ABSTRACT

*This research project intends for a Gynocritical study of Muslim Women characters in selected Partition literature to bring into view the struggles and agency of Muslim women protagonists, shattering the stereotypes attached to them.*

*Partition literature written by women authors defies media stereotypes of Muslim women as passive, oppressed, or caged within religious and domestic limitations (Kabbani 1986). Through the close reading of Sunlight on a Broken Column by Attia Hosain, The Pakistani Bride by Bapsi Sidhwa, and A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam, this project takes on an intersectional analysis of gender, religion, class, and cultural identity through the framework of Gynocriticism and Narration Discourse.*

*Traditionally, patriarchal social structures and media representations have eroded the experiences of women and put them under the great narrative of politics (Ali 2009). Literature thus provides space to amplify the voices of marginalised women and their resistance, agency, and survival. Literature about Muslim women is underrepresented and studying novels by women breaks the matrix created by men and those women get a voice to represent themselves; as literature should inspire us, together with empowering women.*

*A close reading of these novels demurs the stereotype of Muslim women as mere victims by weighing on the fact that they trample cultural, political, and religious problems thrown at them with themselves onboard through the foundation of Gynocriticism.*

**Keywords**: Partition, Identity, Agency, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gynocrticisim

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## Hypothesis

The selected Partition literature dismisses the conventional narratives by portraying Muslim women as complex individuals who exercise their autonomy. The characters in these Partition Literature novels turn down patriarchal depictions that project them as passive, weak, or submissive women. They also manifest how Muslim women's character exposure intersects with religion, gender, and identity crises, making them active agents of change in their communities during a politically frantic environment.

## Review of Literature

Rabia Umar Ali analyses how, in writing Partition history, Muslim women's voices were erased, with an accusation being that a lack of deeper discussion about their experiences and the cost of this omission has produced an incomplete vision of events (Ali 2009).

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This chasm is further responded to by Urvashi Butalia, who relies on oral histories to bring forward the tales of women who were at the receiving end of Partition, especially violent and marginalised. According to Butalia, "Those lost narratives need to be reclaimed in order to understand the full scope of the experiences of women of that time" (Butalia, 2007).

Among the pre-Partition Bengalis, Mahua Sarkar offers an important comparison of urban Muslim and Hindu women to examine socio-cultural factors that influence their life trajectories and identities. Her study throws light on the nuances in the way Partition affected the lives of different religious communities (Sarkar, 2015). Together, these sources convey the complexity of Muslim women's experiences as resilience and agency and a need to have fine roles in Post-Partition narratives.

**Identity and Selfhood**

In the *Sunlight On a Broken Column*, born in a wealthy *Taluqdar* (aristocrats turned landowners) Muslim family, Laila's wish to study and become independent shocks her conservative extended family. Her being an orphan of a father with a westernised outlook, creates pressure on her to survive in her conservative relative's family as she is dependent on them. Her storyline reveals issues of conflict between culture and transition during the Partition and personal demand for liberation from tradition as the world she has known crumbles in front of her.

Most of Laila's agency stems from her privileged background of growing up in an upper-class family and the ability to fulfil her intellectual passions. Meanwhile, the character of Zaitoon from *The Pakistani Bride* is burdened by class, geographical, and intellectual barriers. She was taken out of school at a young age and couldn't complete her education, which took away the opportunity to develop intellectual ideals, which could have only been possible through access to education, While Laila enjoyed all privileges in education, the Zaitoon lacked in this regard. She finished her emancipation by defying society, her abusive marriage, and everything else she had considered as a part of her, since childhood.

Rehana in *A Golden Age* also shows this struggle, as she represents the conflict. The turbulent Bangladesh Liberation War casts a darkness over the life of the widow Rehana, as she is struggling to balance her life as a mother and a patriot. Her act of reclaiming her children, initially taken away by the state, represents not just maternal love but also her assertion of power. Rehana's identity shifts through her engagement with historical events, as she evolves from a passive victim of legal systems to an active participant in political resistance. She supports the political stance of her children and willingly gets involved in the political struggles of Bangladesh.

**Familial Pressure**

In *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon, firstly sculpted by her adoptive father Qasim's ideals of what a good daughter should be, finally realises that allowing herself to get trapped by the

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expectations of her family will only dig her deeper into suffering. Her choice to flee an abusive marriage is a choice that marks a turning point, from submission to liberty. Her journey exhibits her gaining back control of her life and her refusal of patriarchal restrictions imposed upon her by the male members of her clan.

Maya in *A Golden Ag*e, is wedged between the fears of her mother and her own politically awakened feelings. She is drawn towards revolutionary ideals that are problematic towards the more traditional expectations of her upbringing. She chooses her ideals of being a form of action in the war-torn state of Dhaka and defies the norms of women being bystanders during Partition. Her choice of identity defies the familial structures of patriarchy that ensnare women during such tumultuous times. Through a gynocritical approach, Anam has created the character of Maya who blooms amidst the company of her college's politically awakened girl-mates who are birds of a feather, wishing for the independence of their country.

Maya establishes her name working as a journalist. Maya's character is a true example of a modern Muslim girl as she is an educated, politically motivated woman. The conception conserved in the media of Muslim girls, is being unaware of the politics and having zero voice is changed as Maya is always at the front of the politics going on in her country during the liberation war. Maya harbours multiple identities of being a daughter, sister, friend, and patriot.

**Internalised Norms of Gender**

Internalised gender norms and patriarchy forge the consciousness of women. It is in these women-authored novels where the women characters handle the expectations of society toward their gender, much of the time they view themselves through this internalised patriarchy. However, their character's stories also prove how they eventually shed these internalised norms to embrace self-defined identities.

In *The Pakistani Bride*, Miriam is conscious of the internalised gender norms that exist in the culturally disparate hilly society of Kohistan completely fathoms the ways of the tribal people. She warns her about the family feuds and the bloody murders, the societal norms that would be impossible for Zaitoon to comply with as she is brought up in the culturally distinct city of Lahore. While Miriam herself accepts some gender expectations through marriage, she exercises her agency by advising and trying to convince Zaitoon against rushing into marriage, recognising the risks such a union might pose to Zaitoon's life and lead to her eventual physical and emotional displacement.

These characters showcase the obstacles in bargaining identity; resisting familial pressure in a society where challenging internalised gender norms is easier said than done. In the gynocritical sense, their stories are more than tales of Partition; they present the cultural texts in which they express how Muslim women characters bargain between their desires and what society expects of them.

**The Narrative Discourse theory or Narratology** is a narrative theory by Gerard Genette which will be used. This approach bases its representation of women's experience in such a way that characters are not just passive subjects but agents within the narratives themselves.

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**Narrative Mood**

When a writer begins his story, he chooses to narrate the tale and the events in a special way. This choice in turn forms the **mood** of the story.

The use of Laila's inner voice to chronicle the novel speaks to the silent struggle of many women whose identities and choices were heavily circumscribed by societal expectations. Hosain's vivid descriptions of cultural rituals and family hierarchies also serve as some commentary on the strictures imposed upon women, and how the shape of a cultural identity determines the strategy of a narrative.

This sort of narration falls under the element of narrative function. In this type of function, the narrator has to simply recount the events going on with the character. The narrator does not share his emotional judgment nor does he validate the truth of what is happening. The narrator focuses on the sensory feelings experienced by Zaitoon, from a detached perspective, which is a characteristic of narrative function.

While the first-person narration of Hosain offers an individualised view of the limitations imposed by society, Anam's third-person limited perspective in *A Golden Age* allows the readers to watch the character of Rehana's resilience evolve within national conflict. The use of **reported speech** by the narrator familiarises the readers with what the characters have said by paraphrasing the content, and the intent is to focus on the speaker's actions. An example of this speech is ***"Yes, well,' she answered quietly, and then, without meaning to, she said, 'We're having a war;'"*** **-** (Page 324, Anam 2009).

In the scope of Sidhwa's omniscient narration in *The Pakistani Bride*, the scope is widened into being able to critique patriarchal structures that keep Zaitoon confined. Narrative fragmentation has been used as the basis for reflecting on a fractured identity in both of these novels, deconstructing stereotypes from the structural boundaries.

**The Narrative Instance**

In *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Attia Hosain uses a first-person narrative voice wherein the principal protagonist, Laila, articulates her agency over traditional family expectations. This voice explores the inner turmoil of Laila to present a very personal perspective of the woman's plight with the restrictions of their Culture.

In portraying Laila's voice with intellectual and emotional depth, Hosain, thereby, challenges the stereotype of the submissive Muslim woman. The author uses an **internal focalisation** narrative perspective to translate Laila's perspective. In this element of narrative perspective, the narrator knows as much as the protagonist, and the focal character is in charge of providing the information to the readers.

There is a difference between the narrative voice and the narrative perspective which Genette calls Focalisation as per Gennette, "So by focalization I certainly mean a restriction of 'field' –

actually, that is, a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience" (Page 74, Genette, 1988).

Through using a Zero Focalisation or an omniscient third-person point of view in *The Pakistani Bride,* Bapsi Sidhwa can visually sketch the social and power dynamics surrounding her protagonist, Zaitoon. The narrative shifts between characters as the reader views Zaitoon's choices through the limitations that society places upon her. In the zero focalisation types of narrative perspective, the narrator has full knowledge of the characters and the story. He knows about the inner thoughts of the character.

Finally, Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* makes excellent use of third-person limited in exploring the inner life of Rehana Haque, a widow who is wracked with both personal and political crises at the time of the Bangladesh Liberation War.

## Findings

In the context of the Partition, Muslim women have been stereotyped as the victims, as the bystanders, as the weak ones with no agency or voice. In contrast to this brutal stereotype, these primary texts use noetic discursive frames that dare to change the straightforward categorisation of Muslim women in the eyes of the readers.

For instance, in the semi-autobiographical novel *Sunlight On a Broken Column*, Attia Hosain moulds the protagonist Laila, who might be an example of a younger Attia, as she belonged to a Taluqdar family of Lucknow, too with a mindset of an educated politically awakened upper-class woman. Laila shatters the stereotype of Muslim women being passive and submissive by confirming her political ideals and rejecting the hypocritical liberal ideals expected of her. Her fight with the conservative culture created during the partition of India and the loss of aristocracy is an example of resistance and agency.

## Partition and Displacement in *The Pakistani Bride and a Golden Age*

In Bapsi Sidhwa's T*he Pakistani Bride*, the effects of partition's mindset on people come alive through Zaitoon, whose existence is dramatically changed by the environment that surrounds her. Moving from the relatively safer plains of Lahore to the tribal lands of Northern West Pakistan, Kohistan, in the Karakoram Range is no transposition, this denotes the psychological trauma that women go through in the name of family, honour, and displacement.

Physical and psychological violence are common with the wave of migration, as well as gender-based violence (Parvin, 2016). Zaitoon becomes a victim of male chauvinism and cultural norms silencing her. Sidhwa brings to light how an event like Partition sends innocent girls like Zaitoon to the sidelines of the community and how personal tales often take a backseat to political propaganda. Zaitoon’s realisation that depending on her husband or her father would only bring her death she uncovered a concealed truth that if she didn't save herself, she would die in a “hostile inscrutable maze” (Sidhwa, 2008).

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In *A Golden Age,* Tahmima Anam dives into the post-effects of Partition that a young widow and a mother undergoes; a woman who finds a purpose for life during the longstanding Bangladesh Liberation War. The emotional and psychological trauma caused by the Partition, and the way she lost her children psychically, emotionally and mentally became a driving point for her to bring out a change in her life, to prove her agency to society.

Rehana is inspired by her politically awakened children and sets out to perform tasks while putting her life at risk. She refuses the assigned role of the victim of history and marks a new type of Muslim woman in Partition literature who is resilient and courageous. Her toils with identity, property rights, and the responsibilities that accompany motherhood are deeply entangled with the political changes that were the aftereffects of the Partition.

**Gynocriticism and the Making of Agency in Muslim Women**

One of the goals of pushing through the patriarchal, men-dominated world of critical theories was to rediscover the works of women authors who have been obscured by time. Women have always played a supporting role be it in the events like partition, where they were forced to be onlookers, or in the field of literature, where women writers are not represented enough. Through the framework of gynocriticism, the study aimed to reconstruct the political, cultural, and social experience of women by contributing to words of feminist criticism by analysing Muslim women and partition literature.

By studying these characters created by women writers, the study successfully defies the stereotypes of Muslim women in literature and the marginalisation and misconceptions regarding Muslim women created during the Partition. The women writers create the textual meaning and through the emphasis on Gynocritisim the subjective experiences of Muslim women during the historical and political situations of Partition by creating a new realm of female culture.

The novels become one-of-a-kind examples of gynocriticism as this type of women's literature rises above death, suffering, compromises, and madness by showcasing a will to change (Showalter, 1989).

The women authors have successfully provided direction towards the stream of gynocriticism by reclaiming their voices and rejecting androcentrism and male bias. Although written during different timelines, the Women writers have come up with a real representation of women's feelings and experiences that have been lacking in the presentation of male literature where Muslim women are cast as oppressed victims.

**Narratological Discourse**

By deconstructing the narrative strategies used by the authors, the study brings out the intimate details of the narration techniques that inform the readers about the thoughts, choices, and feelings of the women characters as well as the women writers. By studying the narration mood, the narration instance, and the narration perspective employed by the authors the study shows how a narrative voice changes the story's understanding and brings out the multiple voices of

Muslim women characters by portraying them in different lights and giving a background of the context of historical, political and social changes during the Partition.

**Conclusion**

By breaking down the narrative strategies used in the novels through the Narration theory of the Narrative discourse or narratology by Gerard Genette, the elements of Narration Mood the Narration Instance, Narration Perspective, and Narration Stance are used to analyse the novels.

The use of the literary criticism theory of gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter created a robust framework for analysing women-authored literature. The women authors gave voice to marginalised communities of women and gave examples of agencies which in turn empowers readers. The study of the selected women authors through the framework of gynocriticism creates a space for women's literature and brings back the forgotten work and writers in the history of literature. By rediscovering the work of women writers, this study contributes to words, keeping the female tradition alive.

To conclude, this study has achieved the aim of proving how Women Writers in Partition Literature break the stereotypes of Muslim Women characters being passive and weak by portraying their agency and resilience in varying circumstances after the Partition. By using the feminist framework of Gynocriticism, the study analyses the primary novels written by Women authors and proves how the selected women writers contribute towards keeping the female tradition alive, through deconstructing the narrative strategies with the theory of Narratological discourse, the readers get an insight into the thoughts, feelings, decisions of the women characters as well as a broader context of the story, thus the study justifies the thesis statement: In Partition Literature Muslim women characters showcase a degree of agency and autonomy defying the passive victimhood often depicted in conventional media.

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