

The Culture of Silence and Secrets: Repressions and Psychological Disorders among Pakistani Housewives in Fiction



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Abstract *Pakistani housewives suffer emotional and psychological repression in their daily lives, which result in mental instability and psychological disorders. Through the analysis of two short stories by Pakistani feminist writers Shaila Abdullah and Rukhsana Ahmad, this paper studies the repression of Pakistani housewives, and their emotional sufferings, to identify the long-lasting effects of emotional abuse among Pakistani women. Using the Freudian theory of unconscious as theoretical basis, this paper analyzed the unconscious of both female protagonists, the stereotypical Pakistani housewives. Through narrative analysis of both short stories, it is concluded that due to the Pakistani culture of silence and secrets unconscious of women becomes their cage, a cage that restrains all their unexpressed emotions, fears and memories. This paper suggests consciousness raising among Pakistani women regarding the significance of their psychological health, which can destroy their lives without them knowing about it.*

Introduction

Pakistan is one of the countries where women's conditions need reformation and change. Even though a lot of progress has been made in past few years regarding the social injustice faced by women all over our country, many important issues remain beyond the limelight. Many reforms have been made on the government level in the law of Pakistan which is a promising start towards the journey of female liberation, women's empowerment and independence. A bill passed in 2012 regarding domestic violence ensured the inclusion of all aspects of violence

crimes committed against women all over the country. Female representation in the Pakistan senate and other important powerful units of Pakistani political system is another positive change.

As many powerful women are raising their voices against injustice and cruelty, many of them are proving themselves in various parts of life and supporting each other as well. The bill passed against the crimes of domestic violence against women not only included physical forms of abuse and violence as punishable crime but clause 4 (d) is titled “emotional, psychological and verbal abuse”. Acknowledgement of emotional abuse and psychological trauma as one of the most significant forms of violence against women is another hint towards an elevated understanding of people especially by the authorities regarding problems faced by women in Pakistan.

Despite acknowledgement of psychological abuse in Pakistani law, the statistics regarding crimes committed against violence present a very different picture, in contrast with the image presented by media and authorities. According to the statistics provided by Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2014), Punjab Gender Parity (2016) and Social Enterprise Development Centre (2016), an overview of cases of domestic violence reported all over the country in the time span of four years i.e. 2012-2016, there were more than 8,500 in number. Even though it only represents the cases ‘reported to law and justice’, it is a huge number of crimes in a very short time.

Another important aspect of these statistical reports, which triggered the researcher was the absence of a single case of psychological, emotional or verbal abuse throughout this time. However, all the reported crimes were extremely violent and were against human rights as well. Some of the crimes which are included, as reported in various areas of Pakistan by victims are ‘Shaving head’, “rape and sexual abuse”, “honor killing”, “acid attacks”, “setting on fire and burning”, “amputation” and “torture”. In another survey by the human rights commission of Pakistan spread over 12 years of reports i.e. from 2004-2016 of violence cases filed regarding female victimization, the ugly face of female suffering is represented. More than 63,000 cases of violence reported in twelve years also include 36,000 cases of female suicide.

Given the severity of all these forms of violence it is no surprise that Trust law (2011) through his research declared Pakistan to be the third most dangerous country for women to live in while Dawn report (2016) claimed that “In Pakistan, every second woman faces abuse”. Besides, a huge number of women committing suicide, to end their own lives shows the presence of emotional trauma, and psychological disorders. The mental fatigue, and severity of abuse for a long time, without any hope for a better future is the major reason for such drastic events. These statistics are alarming and indicate a need for change which starts from awareness and consciousness raising.

Even though many women seem to suffer emotionally and end their lives to stop abuse, the absence of psychological and emotional abuse in these reports can only lead us towards two possibilities. The first is that there is not a single victim of psychological, emotional or verbal abuse. If this is so, there would have been no need for inclusion of clause 4 (D), or inclusion of emotional abuse as one of the four basic forms of abuse faced by women in Pakistan. The second claim which could be concluded through this information is that the victims of psychological abuse are either unaware of their abuse or else they do not consider it a serious form of abuse which is worth reporting.

Inclusion of psychical and extremely violent forms of abuse in these reports indicate the fact that in a traditional and stereotypical society such as Pakistan, abuse is something physically damaging. However, lack of scars, cuts and burns in case of psychological and verbal abuse is the reason why there is not a single reported case of emotional abuse. These facts are also authenticated by researchers such as Zakar et. al. (2014) who, around the same time conducted an interview based on research on 336 Pakistani women between the ages of 20-45. All the women who were interviewed in this survey were married, and most of them were housewives. Zakar et. al. concluded their research by claiming that more than 90% of women are psychologically abused while more than 30% are unaware of their emotional exploitation and abuse.

The statistics are quite high as 50% of the women who faced sexual exploitation, or physical torture also faced psychological suffering and went through emotional trauma of that abuse. Comparison of this research and difference of facts in each form of research report lead us towards an interesting outcome, as repression of abuse and lack of acknowledgement on part of victim can lead towards much more drastic after effects and lifelong damage to the psychological health of victims.

In this paper, the protagonists, like most of the women in Pakistan, are unaware of their abuse: their unconscious is the place of their repression and it leads them towards the path of emotional instability and severe forms of psychological disorders. The psychological instability of these female characters, the housewives of Pakistani household system, is not openly discussed by the writer; rather hints are dropped at various points in the narrative. These hints and clues are used by the researcher to identify the form of psychological instability and its severity. As the characters of Shiwali and Fariha constitute the representation of Pakistani housewives, so the identification of certain disorders in these characters is going to help understand the patterns of emotional suffering and psychological challenges faced by Pakistani women.

Selected Texts

Both texts selected from the two different short fiction collections are based on the

lives of Pakistani married women, the housewives. In both stories i.e. ‘*Moment of Reckoning*’ by Shaila Abdullah and ‘*The Nightmare*’ by Rukhsana Ahmad the protagonist of the narrative, a psychologically abused woman is trying hard to maintain appearances despite their emotional pain, isolation and suffering. A short summary of both stories is given below.

Moment of reckoning

Moment of Reckoning by Shaila Abdullah is published in her 2005 short story collection *Behind the Cayenne Wall*. This story is about a young bride, Shiwali, who is suffering in silence as she tries to forget herself in her tough routine. Her routine, a forced cycle of household chores is mostly based on her cleaning and washing rituals which is the only thing she is passionate about. The undivided attention of her husband is unable to help her as she keeps remembering a bitter experience that happened before her wedding. It is revealed in the later part of the story that it was because of that one day when Shiwali stepped out of her house without permission of her parents to meet her soon to be husband on his request. The humiliation caused her emotional damage and leaves her wounded for life.

The Nightmare

This short story entitled the *Nightmare* was published in Rukhsana Ahmad’s 2014 short story collection *the Gatekeeper’s Wife*. This story is based on the life of woman named Fariha who is unable to remember her own name. She goes back and forth in her memories, the time during her childhood when she was sexually abused by a relative. Fariha is in constant pain due to the recurrent nightmare, which she keeps imagining in the daylight as well. In her nightmare she becomes a dove who is constantly getting plunged in her shoulder by an ugly, huge vulture. Each word of this story is important in which each image is a symbol which requires a deep understanding of her context.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the psychological challenges faced by Pakistani married women through their representations in selected fiction.
2. To investigate the effects of unconscious gender repression of married women in selected short fiction to understand the severity of phenomenon.

Research Questions

1. What are the psychological challenges faced by Pakistani married women in their representations of selected short fiction?

2. What are the effects of unconscious gender repression on protagonists of selected short fiction?

Literature Review

The unconscious mind of human beings has always been one of the most important topics of discussion among literary circles as well as in the field of psychology. In this discussion the unconscious minds of women have been explored within literary characters. Literature being representative of society, social issues have been included in the psychoanalytic aspect of human character in most of its representations.

Works of art and literature social, political and cultural highlight and present issues before readers. Within these important issues the issue of female marginalization has always been an important debate among literary critics, writers and philosophers, as Duhan (2015,) asserts in his work, the “writer is not an isolated fact but the product of the age in which he lives and works” (p.192). Works of literature do not only present a reflection of society but often become a cause for social reformation and change (Shah, 2013; Anjana & Bhambhra, 2016). Therefore, when it comes to issues such as marginalization and social injustice, the importance of role of literature cannot be denied.

Literature is an important, if not the most effective platform for social reforms. Therefore, for a very long time, women through the power of their writing have been representing their problems, their status and marginalization as members of society (Chopin, 1894; Walker, 1982; Atwood, 1985). Among many important feminist fiction writers, Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale* has been researched from various perspectives. Among other aspects the theme of ‘feminine power’ within the female protagonist of this fiction has been given importance by a few researchers (Johnson, 2004). However, Mouda (2012) and Kirkvik (2015) viewed it as a postmodernist dystopian novel. Even though the work of Atwood is longer fiction, short fiction has also been written and explored through feminist frameworks within research.

As short fiction played an important role in transmission of the feminine voice across literary circles, in this aspect Chopin’s ‘The Story of an Hour’ (1894) has played a significant role as it portrayed the psychological pain inflicted over married women, who seem to be happily married. The psychoanalytic study of her story led towards a whole new dimension of female unconscious, repression and isolation within their relationships (Hicks, 2009; Kusuma, 2015). Another important story in this respect is undoubtedly titled ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, as this short story deals with the themes of female hysteria, psychological disorders and isolation. Gilman (1892) in her story presented in the form of her protagonist a victim of psychological and emotional abuse within her marital relationship.

This story has also been researched from various perspectives including the aspects of “female entrapment and flight” (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016: 113). This paper is based on an interdisciplinary study of feminist literature, which involves both psychoanalytic and feminist literary and theoretical frameworks. Meanwhile the physical forms of abuse presented through literary works have been explored much more as compared to the psychological forms of abuse and repression (Collins, 2001). Even though abuse and impact of abuse on women have been explored by feminist researchers through literary analyses of feminist texts, these are not the only major concerns. Other than abuse, impact of race, caste system, identity and sexuality on the lives of women have been explored through analyses of literary texts by many researchers (Arndt, 2000; Nitri, 1997; Lorde, 1984; Reed, 2001). A few works have also been explored using psychoanalytic feminist framework of research.

Even though, feminist psychoanalysis is quite complex and difficult to execute on literary texts some research has been focused on both feminism and psychoanalysis to analyze the work of literature. Hallab (1984) in his research explored feminist psychoanalytic aspects of selected works of literature. Not only the researchers but psychoanalytic feminist theorists have contributed a lot towards the development of this field of research and study. Chodorow, (1994; 1997; 2000), Kristiva (1980) and Benjamin (1995; 1998) in their works engaged in the debate of female unconscious. Many important theorists including the ones mentioned above extended the work of Freud and worked on the female unconscious mind.

After Freud (1915), Lacan (1959) presented a different theory of psychoanalysis, conscious and unconscious. Therefore, not only Freudian psychoanalysis but Lacanian psychoanalysis is also used by feminist researchers to explore the psychoanalytic feminist perspective of literary texts (Tezi and Jamili, 2006). The feminist psychoanalyst Angana Chatterjee (2015) identified the ‘Plausibility of a Feminist Philosopher’s Take on Freudian Analysis’ (Chatterjee, 2015:227). In her research she identified the dialogue between Freud and French Feminist Psychoanalyst Irigaray.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which provides the basis for this research is the Freudian theory of Unconscious, which he presented in 1915 through his essay of unconscious. Unconscious as defined by Freud for the first time is “the storage house of dreams, memories, parapraxis, obsessions and phobias” (Freud, 1915, p.3 in 1953). Freud not only discovered the presence of the unconscious human mind but declared it to be much more important as compared to the conscious and subconscious mind. Even though he focused on the unconscious of human beings and declared it to be the origination point for all the repressions and oppressions,

Freud (1915 in 1953) claimed unconscious to be linked with the conscious mind of human beings.

Another important aspect of the human unconscious discussed by Freud is its 'ability towards displacement' i.e. the suffering of human being might be recognized by others because of certain event however the person himself/ herself is unable to identify the root of suffering. This inability to understand one's own unconscious is a deliberate effort of unconscious to keep the realities, bitter truths and dark realities hidden behind the darkness of unconscious mind.

Even though Freud has been criticized many times for presenting a prejudiced perception regarding female mind the theory of unconscious is not gender specific. The unconscious of both male and female is equally mysterious, complicated and unrecognizable to some extent. Therefore, through this framework the characters of Shiwali and Fariha are approached and their unconscious repressions are retrieved in this paper.

Methodology

The method through which the selected texts are approached is the method of narrative analysis. For narrative analysis, the model of narrative structure and analysis presented by Herman and Vervaeck (2005) is adopted. As both these stories are narratives of the lives of Pakistani household women, the housewives and their experiences, emotions and sufferings therefore method of narrative analysis is found to be the closest for analysis purpose. Both narrative and narration are studied in detail, narrative which includes time, characterization and focalization, while narration that is comprised on Events, actants and setting of the narrative are all studied in relation to each other to understand the hidden meanings of the text.

Text Analysis

The short story moment of reckoning written by Shaila Abdullah (2005) opens with the introduction of protagonist, the young bride and a house wife Shiwali. The very first line of the story states the fact that she "*was not an orderly person by birth, her marriage had molded her into one*" (Abdullah, 2005, p.44). the introduction of Shiwali indicates that the event of marriage carries a lot of significance for Shiwali as it has played the key role in her transformation. Secondly the use of work 'molded' carries significance as it is the permanent process of transformation through which a deformed or shapeless material is transformed into a useful material or object. In this story therefore, the character of Shiwali, a useless girl, is now molded into the shape of a perfect housewife after her marriage.

Within the first few lines a lot of hints are given regarding the unconscious of Shiwali, her suffering and her psychological repression. The routines and rituals followed by Shiwali after her marriage are expressed by writer in these lines i.e. *“cleanliness ritual would envelop her like a mania in the early hours of the lazy mornings and waken her from her slumber when the rest of the house had not even stirred”* (Abdullah, 2005, p. 44). The daily rituals of cleanliness are not insignificant or a simple cycle of life, a routine but carry yet another deeper meaning and understanding of her unconscious mind and repression.

The introduction of Fariha on the other hand by Rukhsana Ahmad in her short story *The Nightmare* is quite different. Unlike Shiwali Fariha is not a young bride, she has been married for a long-time period, a mother of three children now she struggles to remember her name as nurse tries to ask her in the very first paragraph of this story. ‘what’s your name’ a simple question, may be the easiest one *“worried her, as it penetrated through dark veils of numbness”* (Ahmad, 2014, p. 79). These introductory lines indicate the psychologically challenged state of Fariha, who is emotionally drained and struggles to identify herself after a life long suffering and isolation within her marriage.

Fariha’s introduction, her characterization and representation of the state of her mind is significant as it hints towards her psychologically challenged state, where she is struggling to maintain her sanity but failing in doing so. Both the characters of Fariha and Shiwali despite their difference of age, experience, status of motherhood, appearance and abuse are different from each other, although both seem to suffer from isolation and imprisonment within their unconscious. Shiwali is trying to devise the meaning of her life by sticking to her rituals, the meaningless routine of household chores, to stay sane while Fariha tries hard to remember her name, to fight against the veils of darkness and numbness which has now become the part of her life.

The emotional struggle and psychological challenges faced by Shiwali are described in the next few paragraphs, the unusual behavior and untriggered anger towards her life seem absurd. The repression of her true emotions led her towards the path of obsession where *“she suppressed the restless beast in her heart by busying herself in the mundane tasks of her life that required her attention but instead received her devotion”* (Abdullah, 2005, p.44). the use of word ‘devotion’ and phrase ‘restless beast’ indicates her repression. Shiwali suffered from emotional repression and was unable to express her true emotions. Being a young bride, she needed to be voiceless, an invisible entity, who lacks power and control.

Pakistani culture of silence is one of the reasons for her repression as she could not express herself, her psychological trouble was her way of expressing her repressions. The lack of control she had over her circumstances and fate took her this far in the path of her insanity that now her rituals were her way towards freedom. She *“delved into this one habit in life where she had supreme control, where she was the queen and all the lifeless objects in the house her attendants,*

bowing and bending at her pleasure” (Abdullah, 2005, p.44). it was not only her lack of control over her life and circumstances but lack of true relationships which was more disturbing to her and caused her loneliness. This loneliness and lack of true relationships, anyone to share her depressions, repressions and emotional pain was the true cause of her psychological struggle and pain.

Everyone in her new house let her ‘obsession flourish’, instead of finding something unusual about her behavior it was a pleasant surprise for them to find out that the new daughter in law is devoted towards her household chores like no one else. *“Everyone in the house sang her praises, but no one really understood her. Why wouldn’t a girl of twenty-one have any interests? It was baffling to them”* (Abdullah, 2005, p. 45). Her behavior is just the routine for them, no one noticed something unusual because it was only normal for them to behave in this manner and perform their duties regularly without saying much. The other women of this house scared her: Shiwali saw her future in them whenever she saw them

They walked like they were in some kind of trance, puppets caught in a show they did not wish to be part of, yet bidding to the strings of their master almost mechanically. Sometimes Shiwali saw herself among them, a little puppet, following the entourage, and after a while they all become one, one mind, one soul, one heart, one role form which there was no escape (Abdullah, 2005, p. 45).

Shiwali required escape, escape form that one role, the role of a housewife which was imposed on her by her parents, and was also the fate of other women of her new household.

While it was Shiwali’s fate, in her imprisonment Fariha was stuck herself due to the social and cultural bondage, silence and secrecy, taught to her throughout her childhood. Growing up in reserved Pakistani society she learned repression as way of her life. She was taught by the elders that *“a man is like a vessel, hard and unchanging, and a good woman should be like water, flowing and adapting herself to his shape”* (Ahmad, 2014, p. 80). Marriage, according to her learning was a job which requires ‘hard work’, ‘yielding’ and ‘adapting’, she was denied from the very early stages her right to herself. She was no one, but a woman who must play the role of perfect daughter, a wonderful wife and good mother.

These lessons of maintaining silence and keeping all the dirty secrets to herself were the cause of her psychological struggle, and she kept asking herself questions. She saw the ‘hard and unchanging’ face of her husband and remembered all these lessons. She asked herself that *“would she break if she didn’t yield? Must she yield even when her whole being revolted against the slithery panting thrusts”* (Ahmad, 2014, p. 80). The sexual abuse she suffered within her marital relationship left her with deep emotional scars and inflicted psychological trauma. It was the lack of control in her life, her inability to change her circumstances, to stop abuse which was the cause of her psychological condition, her suffering and isolation within the marital relationship. She kept asking herself if she could revolt, say something to stop abuse, do something about it but the upbringing within the patriarchal society

of Pakistan was stronger than all her resolutions. The socially learned behavior was stronger than her impulse to revolt against abuse.

Even though both these women are quite different to each other in their age, their social standing, their economic backgrounds, their thoughts and their personalities, the abuse they suffered was quite similar, and even the circumstances of that abuse and psychological pain inflicted by silence was related. While Shiwali “*stubbornly followed routine like a religion*” Fariha “*felt no emotional, no anger, no joy, no grief and no pain*” (Abdullah, 2005, p. 46; Ahmad, 2014, p.84). It was the duration for which they both suffered abuse which was the reason for this difference. Shiwali a young girl of twenty-one had only been hurt for a few months, while Fariha, the mother of four lived and raised her children alone for ten long years. A woman in her mid-40s had been through a long journey of pain. Therefore, their psychological struggle was quite different as well and so was the state of their minds.

In spite of the difference of their struggle and their suffering, both Shiwali and Fariha found themselves in loveless marriages. The marital status of both these protagonists further took them towards repression of their true desires, their emotions and their dreams. Shiwali knew that her husband “would never find the key to heavy door of her heart” (Abdullah, 2005: p.48). On the other hand, Fariha realized herself that the sexual intimacy between her and her husband requires her timidity and her submission rather than her affection and emotional attachment. She knew that “when Salim’s body hardens and pushes against her thighs, demanding to be contained, she must yield” (Ahmad, 2014: p.80). The use of word “yield” in this context is quite suggestive as it indicated the nonconsensual nature of sexual relationship between Fariha and her husband. Shiwali too faced such problems as “the moments of intimacy were almost a chore to Shiwali, devoid of love, leaving Arbaz discontented and incensed” (Abdullah, 2005: p.48).

Use of the words ‘Chore’ and ‘yield’ indicate that, both these women, the protagonists of these stories were unable to enjoy the sexual intimacy which is a very important part of any relationship especially among married couples. However, their inability to connect with their spouses is one of the causes of their repression and effect of that culture of silence which taught them to keep these “dirty secrets” to themselves. As a representation of Pakistani married women both these women both the are pushed into relationships without their consent and are now asked to compromise and maintain these burdensome relationships for the rest of their lives. In respect to this aspect of Pakistani society many researchers such as Zaman (2012; 2014) presented their valuable research in forced marriages and deprivation of the inheritance right of Pakistani women.

“Pakistan Society for the protection of rights of child” presented their detailed report on the subject and claimed that “the practice of child, early and forced marriages is widespread and occurs in all regions of Pakistan, with the highest prevalence in Sindh province” (Jillani, 2015). In their report they further claimed

that the majority of females are the victims of child marriage as well as forced marriage which further causes abuse within marital relationships. Therefore, the rate of abuse among Pakistani women is much greater as compared to other regions.

Another important aspect of Shiwali's and Fariha's lives is their resistance against repression and psychological abuse. Shiwali gave up her resistance as a part of her resistance strategy, the silence which was imposed on her and taught to her by her parents, her mother and society was used by her as a weapon to resist her abuse. She knew what she was doing, she had a plan, a plan she knew would work, "she would use the weapon of silence as her defense" (Abdullah, 2005: p.50). Fariha, however, used the power of her unconscious to resist against the constant abuse which had now become the part of her life. The consistent abuse she could not resist consciously was violently confronted by her unconscious and resulted in her psychological distress and loss of consciousness.

During the long years of abuse, she never tried to resist but only found ways to yield, although at the end her unconscious took control and presented before her the innermost fears of her life. The sexual exploitation, the abuse and suffering she went through took the shape of that horrible nightmare which then became the reason for her disoriented mind and loss of consciousness. She went deep into the rabbit hole, never to be heard, seen or to suffer again. She sank herself, buried deep into her own miseries so she does not have to suffer any more.

Conclusion

Through the textual analysis of selected short stories, we can conclude that the psychological challenges faced by married Pakistani women according to their representations in literature vary according to their circumstances and nature of their abuse. All forms of abuse cause psychological trauma emotional and sexual abuse is the major cause of mental instability and psychological disorders among characters studied in detail, andariha also suffers from hallucinations, a disorder which is generally known as schizophrenia in medical terms (Khan et. al. 2013).

The symptoms of this severe disease are found all over the text without any direct reference as she is imagining things and sensing images others cannot witness. She loses her mind to this severe psychological disorder due to the long years of abuse and suffering. Shiwali suffers from another psychological disorder, the kind of disorder found in people with symptoms of depression and isolation; she suffers from a disorder known as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in medical terms (Analise de Souza et.al. 2014). OCD being one of the severe disorders is also affecting her health and quality of her life.

Lastly, the effects of these disorders and psychological challenges are far reaching and caused mainly by the Pakistani culture of silence, the silence taught to young girls by their immediate family members, their female role models and

which is expected from the society. The silence they learn as part of their behavior costs them much more than their happiness and leaves them with scars of exploitation, abuse and isolation for the rest of their lives. To make Pakistan a better country, we must raise consciousness regarding psychological abuse among the masses and teach our daughters to be resilient rather than being docile. Giving voice to women will surely help reduce their suffering and improve the situation of the psychological health for Pakistani women.

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