

The Influence of Women's Oppression in 'Holy Woman' and 'Good Muslim': A Comparative Literary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This comparative literary analysis investigates the theme of women's oppression in *Holy Woman* (2001) and *Good Muslim* (2007), focusing on how the protagonists confront societal expectations and the limitations imposed by patriarchal systems within their cultural contexts. The study examines the experiences and reactions of female characters to the pressures of subordination, frequently finding them ensnared in conventional roles that restrict their individual rights and liberties. This research employs a qualitative methodology and textual analysis to examine the emotional and psychological challenges faced by these women, focusing on their expressions of anger, frustration, and resistance in confronting entrenched gender norms. *Good Muslim* explores the intricate dynamics of religious and social expectations regarding women's roles in post-independence Bangladesh, while *Holy Woman* forces the protagonist into a spiritual role that diminishes her personal agency. Both novels depict women who challenge cultural constraints while illustrating their pursuit of self-empowerment through defiance and personal growth. This analysis underscores the conflict between tradition and liberation, illustrating how these characters establish their own identities despite societal limitations. The study also investigates the extensive impact of feminist movements on literature, assessing how these novels mirror evolving perspectives on women's autonomy and rights. This research juxtaposes the protagonists' experiences to illustrate the depiction and challenge of women's oppression, highlighting the evolution of gender roles and the persistent struggle for equality in patriarchal societies.

Keywords: South Asian Subcontinent, Oppression, Submissiveness, Feminism, transformative, Emancipation.

Introduction

The feminist movement gained substantial momentum in the 1970s, facilitating discourse and critique of societal structures. Modern feminism, grounded in liberation and diversity, adopts an inclusive perspective focused on dismantling entrenched patriarchal supremacy. Patriarchal societies frequently marginalize women, portraying them as subordinate entities dependent on men for their existence and survival (Islam & Rashid, 2022, p. 675). Diverse societal sectors primarily situated to men, while Eastern cultures often attribute characteristics such as weakness and submissiveness to women (Lone, 2008, p. 35). In the South Asian Subcontinent, a patriarchal social structure has emerged, compelling women to assume a subordinate position. The socio-cultural hierarchy imposes a construct of inferiority on them from an early age. This gendered hierarchy diminishes women's value in intellectual and artistic endeavours, relegating them as mere objects of sexual desire and servitude within a male-dominated society (Miah, 2020, p. 77). This analysis examines how *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz and *The Good Muslim* (2007) by Tahmima Anam portray the enduring subjugation of women within patriarchal customs, despite the challenges educated women encounter in society.

A persistent theme emerges in both novels: societal norms compel marginalised women to exhibit humility and obedience, thereby preserving their families' honour. Despite their marginalisation, the narratives show how female characters strive to assert their autonomy, often finding their voices as they advocate for their rights within patriarchal frameworks. In *The Holy Woman*, Shahraz examines the challenges faced by a protagonist compelled to embrace celibacy in order to uphold her family's honor. The novel emphasizes the themes of patriarchal dominance and the limitations imposed on women's autonomy by conventional societal standards. Anam's *The*

Good Muslim explores the convergence of political unrest and gender subjugation, emphasizing the challenges faced by women in Bangladesh as they navigate societal expectations in a patriarchal context. Both novels examine the themes of self-liberation, financial independence, and the intrinsic desire for autonomy, highlighting the intricate interplay between individual aspirations and societal responsibilities. The theoretical framework of feminism underpins this analysis, facilitating an understanding of the portrayal of women's struggles in the selected novels. The study elucidates how female characters articulate anger and dissatisfaction, highlighting their attempts to challenge the constraints of a patriarchal society. These initiatives embody overarching feminist issues related to autonomy, empowerment, and opposition to male supremacy.

The persistent themes of patriarchal oppression, societal barriers, and the quest for individual rights are fundamental to the novels, illustrating the difficulties women encounter in their pursuit of identity and autonomy. This research uses textual analysis to examine the evolution of female characters within the framework of feminist ideology. This study conducts a comparative literary analysis of *The Holy Woman* and *The Good Muslim*, evaluating the resistance of female characters to patriarchal dominance and their incremental pursuit of empowerment. The analysis explores the socio-cultural status of women in the South Asian Subcontinent, investigating their challenges to patriarchal norms in their quest for independence. This study enhances the comprehension of how feminist theory shapes the depiction of women's struggles and empowerment in contemporary regional literature.

The feminist movement in the South Asian Subcontinent

The emergence of feminism in the South Asian Subcontinent has prompted a thorough analysis of the traditional power dynamics, which have predominantly been dominated by men. Contemporary women, portrayed in diverse literary compositions, repudiate these limitations, leading to a significant alteration in women's perceptions. South Asian female authors frequently examine the internal and interpersonal conflicts of self-sacrificing women, illustrating the complex realities of gender inequality. Patel (1985) contends that feminist ideology in the South Asian Subcontinent has been influenced by an amalgamation of sociological theories, ethical philosophies, and political movements promoting gender equality across social, political, and economic domains (S. 3). In the early 1900s, Mahatma Gandhi initiated a nationwide movement for women's liberation, while social reformers such as Rajaram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for women's education (Singh, 2019, p. 22). Gandhi championed women's autonomy in determining their own destinies, establishing a precedent for subsequent feminist movements in the area. In *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz and *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam, the principal female characters represent the challenges faced by women who oppose patriarchal subjugation while manoeuvring through intricate sociocultural demands. These novels underscore the persistent conflict between conventional norms and the quest for female autonomy. Feminist movements in the South Asian Subcontinent, akin to those in other areas, exhibit a range of diverse and occasionally contradictory viewpoints, influenced by geographical location, socioeconomic class, and historical context.

According to Samita Sen, the condition of women in India during the late 1970s and early 1980s significantly influenced the emergence of the feminist movement, especially via grassroots activism (Sen, 2000, S. 4). The pursuit of women's rights has frequently been characterized by contradictions, as movements have sought to redefine femininity within the domestic realm while simultaneously advocating for political representation (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 133; Sinha, 2008, pp. 634–635). Both *The Holy Woman* and *The Good Muslim* illustrate the subjugation of women through patriarchal systems that restrict their choices and autonomy. The female protagonists in these novels confront oppression, articulating discontent with their societal roles and ultimately striving for personal autonomy. Historically, feminist movements in the South Asian Subcontinent have confronted issues including child marriage, widow immolation, and female infanticide while promoting women's education and suffrage rights. Early feminist initiatives, spearheaded by educated women, contested entrenched gender stereotypes within cultural and psychological frameworks (Alam, 2021, p. 11; Rehman et al., 2022, p. 1050).

During the advancement of feminism, the second wave in the mid-1970s witnessed middle-class, educated women engaging more actively in social movements. These women repudiated the paternalistic dispositions of men, and affluent women engaged in philanthropy, positioning themselves as proponents of women's rights. The third wave of feminism, which arose in the 1990s and 2000s, expanded the parameters of feminist discourse by incorporating marginalized groups of women, including women of colour, indigenous women, and those of religious and ethnic minorities. This wave highlighted the necessity of addressing the intersections of gender with other forms of social inequality, as evidenced by the varied backgrounds of the female characters in *The Holy Woman* and *The Good Muslim*. Feminist studies on the South Asian subcontinent have examined feminist movements throughout various historical periods, emphasizing caste, class, and the effects of colonialism. Patel (1985) observes that feminist analyses frequently neglect the disabled body (p. 13). The rise of novel feminist ideologies, especially within urban middle-class environments, signifies the increasing entrepreneurial and individualistic inclinations of contemporary South Asian women, as articulated by Gilbertson (2018, p. 5). These developments are evident in the characters' quest for autonomy and the affirmation of their rights, notwithstanding the social and cultural

constraints they encounter. An excessive emphasis on the cultural dimensions of third-wave feminism may alienate a generation of women seeking alternative avenues to empowerment, regardless of their incompleteness or imperfections.

The Holy Woman and The Good Muslim provide a profound literary examination of women's subjugation and their defiance against patriarchal systems in the South Asian Subcontinent. These novels depict female characters pursuing empowerment, mirroring the wider feminist struggles for autonomy, equality, and self-determination that persist in shaping the discourse on women's rights in the region.

Result and Discussion

The multifaceted experiences of women in the South Asian Subcontinent cannot be reduced to a singular narrative, as this would overlook the diverse challenges encountered by marginalised women. The novels *The Holy Woman*, and *The Good Muslim* feature distinct female protagonists who challenge patriarchal oppression in the South Asian Subcontinent. Each character navigates the intricate manifestations of repression imposed upon them, challenging conventional gender norms and familial expectations. In these works, family members—parents, siblings, or spouses—inflict various forms of injustice, including domestic violence on women. The protagonists defy societal identities, affirming their individuality in reaction to the gender roles that have historically facilitated their oppression. The selected novels portray the lives of women in the South Asian Subcontinent, where men frequently restrict them to domestic spheres and rigorously regulate their autonomy. Zarri Bano from *The Holy Woman*, and Maya from *The Good Muslim* each confront the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society, progressively contesting these constraints while enduring significant suffering as a consequence. Maya asserts, “You cannot marry me and transform me into one of those women adorned with jewellery, meticulously crafting perfectly round parathas, and adhering to every directive of my mother-in-law” (p. 230). This defiance against conventional expectations illustrates the wider struggle of women to reject the passive roles dictated by a patriarchal society.

Sudhir Kakkar's psychoanalytical approach elucidates that South Asian women, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, frequently construct their identity through motherhood, a culturally entrenched belief that supersedes individual rights (Narayanan, 2014, S. 220). This belief system reinforces patriarchal ideology, which regards women as intrinsically inferior to men and restricts their capacity to face life's challenges, thereby perpetuating their subjugation. In the *Holy Woman*, Zarri Bano's resistance to her family's determination to designate her as a Holy Woman—renouncing marriage and a conventional existence—demonstrates the intense pressures imposed on women by cultural and religious conventions. Zarri Bano defies this predetermined destiny, asserting, “I have seldom prayed throughout my life, nor have I regularly opened the Holy Quran.” What steps must I take to become a Holy Woman? I am ill-suited for that position” (p. 85). Zarri Bano challenges familial and societal expectations through her rebellion, affirming her autonomy in selecting her own trajectory. Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* similarly examines Maya's conflict with societal and familial constraints. When her brother enquires about her medical career, Maya encounters patriarchal sentiments that challenge her autonomy: “What will we do now, I wonder?” (p. 28). This illustrates the overarching challenge women in the Subcontinent face as they strive for personal and professional fulfilment amidst societal limitations. The portrayal of patriarchal oppression through both physical violence and psychological coercion is a significant feature of these works. In the *Holy Woman*, Zarri Bano endures both physical and emotional coercion, as her father's commitment to conventional gender roles aims to dictate her destiny. The *God of Small Things* mirrors this, as Ammu, like Zarri Bano, strives to forge her identity in the face of a conservative and patriarchal society. Ammu challenges her husband's abuse and her family's expectations, demonstrating her rejection of the passive role traditionally ascribed to women in South Asian society (Siddiqui, 2022, p. 40).

Her choice to divorce her husband signifies a repudiation of conventional gender norms and an aspiration for independence. The third wave of feminism emphasizes marginalized women, including women of color and those from postcolonial societies, which is evident in the characters of these novels. *The Good Muslim* illustrates how women in Bangladesh navigate their marginalization while simultaneously challenging societal expectations. Anam's work underscores how women in the Subcontinent, despite their marginalisation, demonstrate agency and actively resist patriarchal oppression. Kothari observes that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* similarly examines societal power dynamics, specifically the oppression of women and lower-caste individuals by patriarchal systems (Das, 2012, p. 216). The chosen novels illustrate how women on the South Asian Subcontinent, despite facing marginalization, strive for empowerment. The internal conflicts and psychological turmoil of characters like Zarri Bano, Maya, and Ammu illustrate the intricate emotional and social struggles encountered by women in these novels. Each protagonist embodies a repudiation of societal conventions and a resolve to reconstruct their identities, notwithstanding the significant sacrifices involved.

In the instance of Zarri Bano, her defiance culminates in her declaration of autonomy: “I am a free woman; I will determine whether I desire this man or any other.” This explains why a decade has passed and I remain unmarried” (p. 16–17). This sentiment resonates throughout the novels, as each woman confronts and ultimately challenges

the patriarchal systems that aim to dominate her. The Holy Woman and The Good Muslim explore the close connection between female empowerment and the rejection of identities imposed by patriarchal systems. These novels interrogate societal norms that aim to restrict women's subordinate roles by emphasizing the psychological and emotional journeys of their female protagonists. These novels depict women who, despite their marginalized status, assert their autonomy and reclaim their identity through the lens of familial obligations, societal expectations, and cultural traditions. In the God of Small Things, Roy illustrates that women can resist oppression by challenging both external forces and the internalized beliefs that sustain their subjugation (Khattak et al., 2019; p. 344). The Holy Woman and The Good Muslim offer a poignant commentary on the persistent challenges faced by women in the South Asian Subcontinent through their portrayals of oppression, resistance, and the quest for identity. The journeys of female protagonists toward self-liberation demonstrate how literature can function as a means of comprehending the intricacies of gender, identity, and empowerment within a patriarchal society.

Recommendation

A comparative analysis of The Holy Woman and The Good Muslim yields several key recommendations to enhance the comprehension of women's oppression and their pursuit of empowerment in patriarchal societies. Future literary studies should prioritize the incorporation of intersectionality, examining how elements such as caste, class, religion, and ethnicity intersect with gender to influence women's experiences on the South Asian subcontinent. This method would offer a more refined understanding of the complex nature of oppression and emphasize the varied experiences of women beyond their gender. Furthermore, feminist discourse must incorporate additional marginalised perspectives, such as women with disabilities, indigenous women, and those from rural locales, often overlooked. Their inclusion would provide a more holistic perspective on gender inequality in the region. A vital element is the emphasis on psychological empowerment, as both novels illustrate the significance of mental fortitude in combating patriarchal oppression.

Researchers and educators ought to investigate how literature can function as a mechanism to foster psychological resilience in women, aiding them in managing societal expectations. Moreover, feminist movements in the South Asian Subcontinent should embrace a culturally attuned strategy, reconciling the pursuit of advancement with deference to traditional values. It is crucial to formulate localised feminist frameworks that address the distinct cultural contexts of South Asian women to prevent the perception of feminist activism as a Western imposition. Finally, comparative literary analysis ought to encompass a greater array of contemporary works by female authors from various regions of the South Asian Subcontinent, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of how women from diverse socio-political backgrounds engage with patriarchy in their distinct manners.

Conclusion

This comparative literary analysis of The Holy Woman by Qaisra Shahraz and The Good Muslim by Tahmima Anam offers profound insights into the theme of women's oppression in patriarchal societies of the South Asian Subcontinent. Both novels depict the complex experiences of female protagonists as they navigate the constraints imposed by societal expectations, religious doctrines, and familial duties. Zarri Bano and Maya exemplify the quest for autonomy and self-determination within patriarchal structures that aim to constrain their liberty. By means of defiance, psychological fortitude, and a pursuit of personal identity, they confront the entrenched norms that oppress women. These novels underscore the emotional and psychological burden of patriarchal oppression while also illustrating the possibility of self-empowerment through resistance. This analysis utilizes feminist theory to illustrate how both novels depict the persistent struggles of women on the South Asian Subcontinent for liberation and equality. The Holy Woman and The Good Muslim criticize patriarchal structures while emphasizing women's ability to assert their rights, thereby challenging societal norms that aim to restrict them. This analysis highlights the necessity of investigating women's oppression within particular cultural contexts, acknowledging the fluidity of gender roles and the transformative capacity of resistance. These novels present a compelling narrative of resilience and empowerment by examining the internal and external challenges encountered by women, thereby mirroring the wider feminist discourse in the South Asian Subcontinent. These works demonstrate that literature remains an essential medium for examining gender inequality, championing women's rights, and fostering a nuanced comprehension of the intricacies of women's liberation within patriarchal societies.

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