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EXPLORING ECHOES OF EMPOWERMENT AND ANDROCENTRISM: A FEMINIST STUDY OF AWAIS KHAN’S “IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS”

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ABSTRACT

Awais Khan’s literary excellence “In the Company of Strangers” revolves around the female characters, in which he engages in the complicated themes of relationships, social expectations, self-fulfilment, women empowerment, and feminist creation. Through his writings, having portrayed different age groups and social classes with great sensitivity, he presents his groundbreaking work as a vital platform to give extended voice to the featured stories that would ordinarily not be heard in mainstream anglophone Pakistani literature. Through the novel under analysis, the writer reinforces the literary landscape of the country, adding the depth and complexity of stories that shine the light on the manifold diversities of women’s experiences. By employing the idea of ‘gender’ proposed by Simon de Beauvoir and Judith Butler respectively, this paper aims to unmask the patterns of female self-drive and marks of domestic violence intricated in the structures of endocentric capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Societal expectations, Domestic violence, Feminist viewpoint, Generational trauma, Pakistani society, Androcentrism, Gender representation.

INTRODUCTION

Awais Khan's "In the Company of Strangers" embarks on a transformative odyssey, boldly challenging androcentrism with arras of female narratives. Characters like Mona and her friends take center stage, skillfully navigating away from traditional male-centric perspectives. The exploration of domestic violence within fractured marriages, such as Bilal and Mona's, becomes a poignant lens, revealing the intricate manifestation of gender-based power dynamics ingrained in societal structures. Through a feminist lens, the analysis exposes the complex interplay between traditional gender roles and societal expectations, shedding light on the systemic roots of domestic violence. Beyond individual cases, the novel advocates for a comprehensive approach to challenge and transform societal norms perpetuating violence against women, especially in the third world.

Moreover, the narrative deals with the enduring phenomenon of generational trauma experienced by women across successive epochs in Pakistani society. Rooted in feminist perspectives, the text meticulously examines persistent suffering attributed to deeply ingrained patriarchal structures. By scrutinizing historical and sociocultural contexts, the research underscores how traditional gender norms perpetuate cycles of discrimination and violence, with each generation inheriting the struggles of its predecessors. Unveiling the intergenerational transmission of societal attitudes contributing to women's trauma, this research fosters a nuanced understanding of generational suffering, advocating for transformative measures that challenge established norms, dismantle

oppressive structures, and pave the way for a future where women break free from the shackles of inherited pain.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Awais Khan's "In the Company of Strangers" presents a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics, particularly challenging androcentrism through a feminist lens. To understand the theoretical underpinnings of the novel's feminist mosaic, it is crucial to delve into the ideas of gender and womanhood as proposed by Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler.

Simone de Beauvoir, in "The Second Sex," critically examines the male-centric perspective that dominates societal discourse. Her assertion that "Women have no grasp on the world of men because their experience does not teach them to use logic and technique" (de Beauvoir, 1953) highlights the inherent biases in traditional gender roles. This quote underscores the limited scope of women's experiences within a patriarchal framework, where male-centric logic and techniques define the norm. Beauvoir's declaration that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman". further emphasizes the constructed nature of femininity (SS 283/2:13). Women, according to Beauvoir, are not predetermined entities; instead, their identity evolves through societal expectations and norms.

Khan's novel aligns with Beauvoir's perspective by unraveling the intricacies of female experiences that are often overlooked or deliberately ignored by the

male-dominated societal discourse. The characters, especially Mona and her friends, serve as vehicles for navigating away from traditional male-centric perspectives. Through their narratives, the novel challenges the notion that women are inherently bound to a specific role or experience, highlighting the diversity and complexity of the female identity.

Judith Butler, in “Gender Trouble,” extends Beauvoir's argument by proposing that the concept of 'woman' is a continuous process, constantly in flux. She argues, “If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (Butler, 1990, p.45). This conceptualization of gender as performative and fluid resonates with the unfolding narratives in “In the Company of Strangers”. The characters, through their actions and choices, actively engage in the construction of their identities, challenging the predefined roles imposed by society.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's assertion that "Despite all our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak" (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989, p.79) complements Butler's theory by emphasizing the impossibility of rigidly defining gender categories. This concept is in line with the experiences of Khan's characters, who frequently overcome the limitations placed on them by social conventions. The story serves as an example of how attempts to limit people to particular gender categories are fundamentally incorrect since identities and experiences are too dynamic and complicated to be cleanly classified.

Furthermore, Sara Suleri's statement that "Men live in homes, and women live in bodies"(Sara Suleri, 1989, p.143) also adds another layer to this discussion,

highlighting the embodied nature of female experiences in contrast to the spatial domains traditionally occupied by men.

The novel's exploration of domestic violence within fractured marriages aligns with Butler's emphasis on gender as a discursive practice open to intervention and resignification. By shedding light on the systemic roots of domestic violence, Khan's work underscores the urgent need for societal intervention to challenge and transform norms perpetuating violence against women.)

The intergenerational trauma experienced by women, as depicted in the novel, also aligns with feminist perspectives. The analysis of generational suffering, rooted in historical and sociocultural contexts, mirrors the way traditional gender norms perpetuate cycles of discrimination and violence. By examining the inherited struggles of each generation, the research advocates for transformative measures that challenge established norms and dismantle oppressive structures.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework drawn from Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler's perspectives on gender provides a robust foundation for understanding and unraveling the gendered discourses in Awais Khan's “In the Company of Strangers”. The novel engages with and challenges traditional gender norms, inviting readers to contemplate the evolving nature of femininity and the urgent need for societal transformation to empower women and break free from the shackles of inherited pain.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In its exploration of the transformative potential of female-centric narratives and the bold challenge against androcentrism, the novel aligns itself with the profound voices of feminist literary giants. Through the reference to leading feminist literature, the portrayal of Mona and her friends with the nuanced complexity just as the theorization of Hooks on intersectionality which raised a caution on a monolithic focus on gender rather than profound comprehension of the conjoining element of race and class connection sounds the alarm (Riley, 2018).

The book "The Second Sex" by Simone de Beauvoir is regarded as an opening chapter of feminist existentialism (Simons, 2001). Echoing the statement that women have historically been defined in the light of men's perspective, the author of this novel re-identifies a male-centered view through the deconstruction process. The narrative's focus on female characters at the forefront resonates with Beauvoir's call for women to define themselves independently (Crawford, 2013).

Channeling the spirit of Audre Lorde, a feminist poet and essayist, the novel confronts societal issues through personal narratives, particularly in its exploration of intricate power dynamics within marriages (Lorde, 2004). The adoption of a feminist lens, as advocated by Lorde, serves to illuminate societal structures perpetuating domestic violence.

The discussion of generational trauma aligns with the work of Adrienne Rich, a feminist poet and essayist. Rich's exploration of women's experiences across time, paralleling the novel's scrutiny of generational trauma in Pakistani society, underscores the importance of understanding historical and sociocultural contexts to dismantle patriarchal

structures (Kidwai, 2001). In conclusion, the novel's engagement with feminist thought weaves a rich nexus, incorporating the insights of Hooks, de Beauvoir, Lorde, and Rich. By skillfully intertwining these perspectives into its narrative, "In the Company of Strangers" contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender representation, domestic violence, and generational trauma in literature, offering readers a profound and transformative literary experience.

ANALYSIS

Drawing from the feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Sara Suleri, the novel deconstructs conventional gender norms and highlights the fluidity and complexity of female identity. The challenges and resiliency of the characters depict the never-ending process of becoming where societal norms and individual experiences converge. As Khan strongly demonstrates through Mona's introspection, "She marveled at her body's capability to respond to Bilal even now, after all the violence. Maybe a part of her had never ceased loving him, or maybe she was deluding herself," (Khan, 2019, p.82) the novel underscores the enduring impact of relationships and the intricate ways in which love and trauma coexist.

Mona, as a main character within the complex interweaving of the Lahore elite class house, embodies a complex narrative shaped by past trauma and a current sense of neglect. Her experiences are underscored by a haunting past sexual incident that has left an indelible mark on her psyche. This trauma casts a shadow over Mona's pursuit of love within the confines of her marriage, compelling her to seek emotional fulfillment. The societal expectations and

pressures inherent in the elite class milieu contribute to her sense of isolation and the desperate search for a connection that transcends the superficialities of her social standing. Mona's character thus becomes a poignant exploration of the profound impact of trauma and societal expectations on an individual's quest for love and fulfillment within the context of the Lahore elite class.

Within the framework of feminist theory, Mona's sense of safety around her husband can be seen as a manifestation of the pervasive gaze dynamics

embedded in typical Pakistani societal norms (Zia, 2014). The prevalent male gaze on women often creates an environment where women may seek refuge within the perceived safety of traditional roles, such as marriage. Mona's reliance on her husband for a sense of security is influenced by the fear of navigating societal change and challenging established gender roles. As Mona describes the gaze of the policeman at Meera's party as in chapter five:

“They watched her with an unreserved stare, their eyes shining like a hungry dog’s.” (Khan, 2019, p.40)



The metaphor underscores the predatory nature of this gaze, highlighting the discomfort and vulnerability experienced by women like Mona in such a scrutinizing environment (Carroll & Tolan, 2023). This vivid portrayal serves as a stark commentary on the power dynamics ingrained in societal norms, where women contend with objectification and unwarranted attention.

Within the context of Pakistani culture, Mona's extramarital affair with Ali disrupts prevailing binary norms surrounding marital fidelity. This act challenges the traditional dichotomy of loyalty and betrayal, offering a deconstructionist lens to the complexities of relationships within the cultural framework. Pakistani society often adheres to strict norms regarding marital fidelity, and Mona's deviation from this norm serves as a deconstructive exploration of societal expectations. The affair becomes a subversive space, unraveling the assumed certainties associated with marital relationships in Pakistani culture. In applying deconstructionist theory to Mona's choices, the narrative exposes the fluid and intricate nature of human connections, shedding light on the cultural nuances that shape and, in turn, are shaped by such relational complexities. Moreover, Bilal and Mona's marriage is marked by elusive mysteries, encapsulated in Mona's poignant reflection after more than two decades together. As in chapter five she admitted that; "It had been more than two decades, and she had come no closer to guessing the true nature of the person she shared her bed with. Maybe she never would". (Khan, 2019, p.42)

The passage of time has failed to bridge this emotional distance, leaving Mona grappling with the realization that she may never truly comprehend her partner. The uncharted territories within their relationship point to

an underlying sense of disconnect, highlighting the enigmatic nature of their union and the challenges they face in achieving a deeper, more meaningful connection. That's the main reason behind Mona's decision to have Ali by her side.

Within the novel, Meera emerges as a bold feminist protagonist, fearlessly challenging societal norms and embodying a beacon for the empowerment of women through outspoken defiance and a steadfast commitment to gender equality.

As in first chapter Mona reminisces about her best friend's profound statements, she recalls, 'If they can stare so openly, then why can't we?'. (Khan, 2019, p.21)

As the narrative unfolds, Meera becomes a symbol of strength, liberating herself from traditional constraints and paving the way for a more equitable story. The novel's exploration of Pakistani society intricately begins with Meera's powerful statement, resonating with the core of feminist discourse. Through a meticulous examination of societal norms, Meera questions the unequal dynamics of gaze, accentuating the imperative for women to embrace the freedom of looking openly. This prompts a critical exploration into the intersection of feminism and cultural expectations within the South Asian context. Meera's remark functions as a profound feminist critique, spotlighting the double standards ingrained in Pakistani society concerning public gazes. It underscores the feminist discourse's advocacy for gender equality in the realm of observation, challenging the traditional constraints placed on women's behavior.

Another female leading character is Bilal's mother Nighat. Her statement and behaviour towards Mona in chapter twelve is true depiction of acceptance of

gender discrimination in cultural context of Pakistani society. As she says;

“A woman should always know her place,” says I. Weak, lustful little creatures women are. Keep them on a short leash or risk finding them glued to the first man available.” (Khan, 2019, p.79)

This novel also delineates patriarchal norms and how gender roles influence Nighat's perceptions, contributing to her dissatisfaction. The examination of power dynamics within the family reveals traditional expectations shaping Mona's experience and influencing Nighat's advice to her son Bilal in chapter fifteen when she says to his son Bilal that:

“You are so much like your father, and yet so different. You have a heart, Bilal, even if you don't know it yet” (Khan, 2019, p.141)

Nighat's guidance not to emulate his father underscores a desire for a shift in prevailing gender norms.

Women's solidarity plays a pivotal role in addressing domestic violence within familial contexts, as exemplified in the case of Nighat and her daughter-in-law Mona. In this scenario, the collective support of women emerges as a powerful force against the perpetration of domestic violence by Bilal. As Nighat says:

“Do right by your wife, Bilal, or I promise you I will assist her in getting rid of this violent marriage. If she wants out, I will make sure she gets out.” (Khan, 2019, p.142)

It not only challenges traditional power dynamics but also contributes to a broader societal shift in perceptions surrounding domestic violence. The

support for Nighat's daughter-in-law within the framework of women's solidarity represents a tangible manifestation of feminist ideals, fostering empathy, understanding, and a shared commitment to dismantling oppressive structures within the family unit.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the literary narrative intricately weaves together the lives of three female leads, Mona, Meera, and Nighat, within the fabric of Lahore's elite class. The feminist perspective in the novel is explicit through the lives of all these leading female characters figuring a way to find their subjectivity and identity. They are on a quest to discover an inner drive that can navigate them to their feminine 'self'. Mona's poignant exploration of trauma and societal expectations reveals the profound impact on her quest for love, highlighting the complexities ingrained in the cultural milieu. Meera emerges as a bold feminist protagonist challenging norms, symbolizing strength and advocating for gender equality through her fearless defiance. Nighat's lack of resistance to gender discrimination looks like her embracement of the social culture, meaning how women are treated in Pakistan. They weave a texture of stories that discuss how relationships, stereotypes, and role of women change inside the cultural milieu of the elite society of Lahore. Moreover, by using the perspectives of feminism and gender as presented by de Beauvoir and Butler respectively, this study unravels the status of women in a patriarchal society where women are taken as commodity and a subject of gender-based discrimination. This article also accentuates how women under the wholesome burden of exploitation try to raise their voices in order to be a part of the

hegemonic & cultural representations of their respective society.

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