



**VOICES OF RESILIENCE: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST STUDY OF
RUKHSANA AHMAD'S "THE GATEKEEPER'S WIFE"**

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Abstract

'The Gatekeeper's Wife' is a postcolonial feminist reading of Rukhsana Ahmad short story collections that take into account the struggle of women and how they had been portrayed in the Pakistani society within their jurisdiction. Ahmad is an authoritative South Asian writer who has been extensively involved in social activism, one that was especially focused on women in the traditional and culturally nuanced contexts. Her narrations have brought to the open some personal and societal problems that women are confronted with, particularly in the face of marriage, and how due to social fragmentation and gender demands, women tend to face emotional heart-wrenching moments and discrimination. By applying close reading and text-based analysis, the study examines the way Ahmad describes the experiences of female characters that have to deal with the problems of gender identity and empowerment, resilience, and cultural dislocation. The research seeks to unlock complex texts of female resistant and vulnerable to examine how culture norms influence life and identity of the female. The placement of the stories in a postcolonial feminist context helps the research to bring into the equation, gender, tradition and social hierarchy. Finally, the research can help promote emerging literature and women studies about Pakistan. By focusing on women who speak back to definitions of societal norms, criminalizing their identities, and other degrading processes of their existence, it highlights the possibility of literature being used as a means of a social critique and alteration. The results are going to be an important contribution to understanding the realities of South Asian women and how narrative can create awareness and motivate to change.

Key Words: *Feminism, Empowerment, Resilience, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation*

1. Introduction

A British-Pakistani novelist, Rukhsana Ahmad is hailed as one whose fiction glides across the cultural fault line between the East and the West, a way of discovering identity, diaspora, and gender. Her acclaimed short stories collection *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) is a devastating window into the lives of women as they struggle to chew up and spit out the tangles of cultural misplacement, marriage friction, and social expectation. The female protagonists of Ahmad are the focus of his work and their identities are created within the tensions between tradition and modernity that have a wider implication of possession and self-definition within patriarchal societies. The short stories in *The Gatekeeper Wife* begin with the title story of the same name and focus on the life of the Englishwoman who lives in Lahore as a foreigner but finds it difficult to balance her life as a foreigner and her life as a domesticated person in a conservative Pakistani family. The other stories that accompany it, 'The Spell' and 'The Ever-Changing Moon' and 'The Nightmare', explore intergenerational trauma, resilience and psychological transformation. Both stories have their own revealing intimate, emotion laden narration to show the socio-cultural



limitations of women who have to live with complex identities. The stories by Ahmad are valuable to the postcolonial feminist literature which offers a reflection on the experiences of women living in an interstitial space between cultures. Her characters operate under pressures just as much as they operate under internal conflict, meaning that their stories are not only individual through and through but are also politically aware. The purpose of the current study is to consider the relation between the life complexities of women as depicted by Ahmad through the context of the short story form highlighting the three facets and the connection between cultural hybridity, gender roles, and emotional struggles. In her narration, Ahmad opens her readers to think over the changing nature of identity, power, and resistance within the diasporas.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The female characters' grapple with reconciling their pasts with their present realities, navigating unfamiliar social landscapes, and adjusting to rigid societal expectations. The narratives reveal a spectrum of emotional turmoil, particularly identity conflicts shaped by cultural pressures. Through Ahmad's storytelling, researchers can gain valuable insights into the contradictory experiences faced by women caught between tradition, migration, and the pursuit of self-definition.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To expose the factors contributing to women's resilience and empowerment in Pakistan.
2. To examine women's emotional experiences vary depending on gender identity, sexual orientation, social class, and other factors.
3. To assess women's main challenges and hardships in Pakistan.

1.3 Significance of the study

The current research study is significant as it brings to forefront these inaudible voices and therefore, helps build an understanding of gender, migration and identity in postcolonial south Asian literature. In this work, the literature turns to the social reflection and remaking. Short stories have been used as an effective and compact way of going through issues revolving around a complex human experience yet they have not been heavily researched as a short story. Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper Wife* (2014) is a resourceful spin to read the author with regard to the lives of Pakistani women especially those who are trying to negotiate displacement through marriage. This compilation highlights the social and emotional issues that affect the women who are not only uprooted in their cultures but are also forced into foreign places. The stories are quite short but are pregnant in meaning; they provide great insights into the challenges faced by women who are needed to walk this fine line between the roles demanded of them as per tradition and their new identities. All the stories depict a pattern that women are usually supposed to adjust themselves to the male-dominated performance to fit in the society, even when they are in a new environment.

2. Literature Review

The issue of representation of experiences of women, struggle and resistance has long been explored by the scholars with regard to the postcolonial literature and media. These studies investigate how such representations open up or perpetuate stereotypes, expand feminism dialogue, and provide more universal stories. Chatterjee (1994) further asserts that postcolonial writing implicates in undermining prevailing gendering techniques as the writers emphasize the social and cultural processes involved in defining women identities. In the consideration of the



way in which women are being conceptualized and represented in the light of the colonialism, Yegenoglu (1998) reveals how the gendered structure of power favours certain groups at the cost of others. In a similar direction, Suleri (2005) goes further to discuss Indian women that are represented as hybrid subjects between a culture, politics and gender respectively in both colonial and postcolonial writings. The issues that Annette, the main character in *The Gatekeeper Wife*, encounters, especially those that concern such problems as language acquisition and cultural adjustments, have been discussed in earlier literature. Although a few studies recognize the heterogeneous identity of a postcolonial situation, they are less probing on the nature of how language can be used as the instrument of inclusion. Gender roles in the marriage between Annette and Saeed have also been examined, especially when it comes to power imbalances that exist between the patriarch and the rest. Zoo is also cited by critics as allegorical environment that symbolizes the freedom and authenticity that Annette yearns to have, which further increases the levels of interpretation in the story.

Wajdani, Khan, and Awan (2017) also adopt a psychoanalytical approach to the story but fail to grasp the depth of the story in full. According to Cilano (2018), Annette can be treated as the representative of the disorientation of Western women when they find themselves in traditional South Asian societies. Rasool, Khan, and Rahman (2019) focus on the protagonist getting emotional relief in her relations with animals, but in the context of such scientific aspects of zoo as globalization or semiotics. However, the proposed study aims to address the shortcomings of this prior research by incorporating intersectionality using a model that considers Annette as a woman, a black woman, a representative of the Irish people and a woman of lower social standing to guide her social perception and mode of making individual decisions. It equally discusses the element of lack of research on the interdependence between neocolonialism, globalization, cultural commodification in the story by Ahmad.

By locating Ahmad's, *The Gatekeeper Wife* (2014) into a broader postcolonial feminist context, the proposed research will seek to unveil how Ahmad satirizes the depiction of power systems that entrapped women symbolically and literally. Furthermore, the ecofeminist angle is applied in this research, interpreting the zoo as a symbol of women entrapment and lost unity with nature. This analogy can be applied to how domination of both women and nature is related to patriarchal societies. Although the work of Ahmad has been addressed in the context of South Asian literature, a significant deficiency in comparison- or reception-based study existed regarding the reception of the postcolonial feminism themes in the novel by various readers.

2.1 Research Gap

Despite the relatively high profile of postcolonial feminism as a field and its application to South Asian literature specifically, Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014) has not enticed significant scholarly attention from this critical perspective. Instead, future studies could instead try to examine intersectional dimensions of Annette's identity that include her gender, race (ethnicity), class and nationality. Furthermore, a more in-depth consideration of the story's critique on neocolonialism and globalization; an ecofeminist interpretation regarding the zoo metaphor and comparison with other postcolonial feminist works may provide worthwhile perspectives.

3. Research Methodology

The current research is a qualitative and interpretivist study. Using the analytic textual analysis method to interpret and evaluate of selected literary text from postcolonial and feminism



perspective using Spivak's notion about marginalization tool as in her well-known essay (Chakravorty Spivak, 1988). An area of text from (Ahmad, 2014) is analyzed using the close reading approach.

4. Textual Analysis

“Nine years of this and still hurts. She tried to block the hurt from her mind as she got her things together.” (Ahmad 2014, p.2)

This quote was chosen because its perfect for reinforcing the lasting pain & trauma of her ancestors, which are the root cause behind Annette's disability struggle. But they are, it appears the last few words we chose for a reason. There is no succumbing to the pain, as it counteracts and goes on acting contrary. This communicates a recurring motif that the man can face hardships and continue on, which reflects how resilient he is to pour back from adversity. Further, gathering her belongings can be seen as a move of empowerment. This is a character in power, an active choice to move on. The act itself is a rejection of being consumed by their trauma, which asserts that they are still an agent in their own right. The theme of resilience and empowerment in this sense is about recognizing the pain and struggles but resorting to persevere choosing life. It is having the courage to change your own reality even in adversity and going through every way with resilience, empowerment. In light of Spivak's theory of the Subaltern, this quote tells volumes about how resilience and empowerment look in reality: "Nine years of this and still hurts. She tried to block the hurt from her mind as she got her things together." The enduring pain of Annette illuminates the lived reality of a subaltern subjected to systemic oppression and marginalization. The pain she bears is not hers alone, it is the evidence of historical and structural violence that has been done against all women of her kind. Still, her trying "to shut the hurt out" and to pull herself together is a kind of strength. It is a survival mechanism, and it helps one to endure the trauma and keep surviving, even through all this pain. It is not rose-colored glasses resistance against all odds, resilience in this sense means continuing to unstick oneself from oppressive forces.

According to Spivak's theory, it is difficult for the subaltern woman to speak because her voice has always been silenced or interpreted by hegemonic discourses. Annette Prior, *Women & Infants* but even the quote that we just looked at offers only a glimpse of Annette's experience because it is through Annette's internal monologue again in her interpretation and my words. Here the limits to representation become clear: we must see this subject as an agent, even if her voice cannot be fully heard. Thus, from a Spivakian perspective the quote in its entirety encapsulates precisely how resilience, empowerment and agency intersect within subalternity. Both in the example of Annette, her strength to withstand or do not always act despite it with my social location and where representation sits as fictive is such a question what turns resolute dedicants into their complications them sustaining/actioning over/through/from intersectionality for self-determination.

“She was circling the cage slowly, carefully moving inside the forbidden inner perimeter of the white railings.” (Ahmad 2014, p. 5)

This extracted text explores various themes in relation to the resilience and empowerment of Tara, as a mother. In a somewhat symbolic manner, our act of walking around the cage and inside its forbidden perimeter epitomizes something that isn't as obvious or outwardly hostile, but instead embodies Tara's subtle forms of resistance; her willingness to break one of those restrictive rules. It is an understated form of resilience, not for show but instead emerging in her subtle



rebellion as she bucks the constraints of her imprisonment to carve out a space where she may assert herself and understand what full humanity could mean for her. The cage is often a direct metaphor for the prison-like conditions in which her freedom and agency as an individual are restricted or confined by various cultural, social dynamics. Her slow, careful navigation of this small territory in some ways reveal an essence of her: a reflection on the struggle and survival that she must endure within its boundaries. She is not resigned to her imprisonment but tries to find outlets or means of transcending her confinement. Moving into the forbidden territory represents the character wanting his own power and freedom. When she does, it becomes a small but defiant middle finger toward the powers that be. This speaks to her unyielding heart in not allowing herself to be utterly limited and restricted by everything she is up against, for finding a place where her voice can exist loudly.

Tara moves slowly and while it may indicate a general disposition not to rock the boat, these are deliberate movements suggesting extreme care given what Tara knows about threatening the status quo. But more than this, the willingness to take these risks speaks of an underlying strength and determination that Tara has a mother. It shows how she would not back down in the face of possible repercussions and how determined she was to find a better sense of liberation as well as empowerment. Through the application of Spivak's thoughts about the Subaltern to this quote, it is clearly denoted how the ability to be resilient in respect to power is further complicated by the effectiveness of marginalizing one's voice: "She was circling the cage slowly, carefully moving inside the forbidden inner perimeter of the white railings."

Spivak argues that the subaltern often evokes agency within those limited power and resources. The calculated way in which Tara goes about making the scene implies that she knows full well of the dangers involved with her act of rebellion. Instead, her active defiance of that border reveals strength and resolve to claim a semblance of freedom in the oppressive confines. According to Spivak, the Subaltern are not heard or misrepresented in dominant discourses. Tara's actions speak louder than her words in this quote. Such silent rebellion is a story of resilience and empowerment that may not be vocalized outright but it certainly written has immense power. Spivak wonders whether the more powerful are capable of representing subaltern experience without stripping its significance. The author shows us a slight amount of what Tara gets up to, but we get only vague clues about the specifics on her motivation or emotions. In this ambiguity we can find the core of Spivak's ideas, as it highlights the inability to represent subaltern experience itself and ultimately why acknowledging agency in silence is important. Overall, with a Spivakian perspective in mind, Tara's act of going round the cage connects to subaltern resilience and empowerment. It shows the complexities of how oppressed individuals resist and cope with oppressive systems, even when their voices are not being fully represented.

***"They were special to her, like family, her babies. It was as if someone had deprived her own children."* (Ahmad 2014, p. 7)**

In Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (2014), it is Annette's attachment to the zoo animals as her "babies" and consequent grief at their loss that reveals a very unique way of looking at resilience and empowerment.: Annette's profound relationship to the animals around her embodies a type of resilience linked with nurturing and support. This commitment, while the animals remain imprisoned nevertheless allows her to give meaning and direction by connecting with others (even if they are not human). This resilience is particularly meaningful in the context of a woman who



likely faced some level of isolation as an immigrant. Annette offers herself as a mother figure, fertilizing his celebrity dick and transforming the feeling of empowerment that comes from nurturing another onto putting all this together to cook three meals for everyone. She has control over the animals, and in a world where she may be oppressed, they could symbolize her own existence. She feels useful and valued in her role as a caregiver.

The death of her children, all the animals she took care of that created a sense of power unto Annette are significant casualties. It is a representation of the loss of autonomy and control in her life, which makes Alice feel "cheated." This loss brings home in a visceral way what can happen if we invest our identity and sense of self into external relationships - the tenuous nature of empowerment based on something transient or out with our control. Annette is in the depths of grief, but her lightness tells a story as well. The scene demonstrates her capacity for emotional depth and connection even when faced with potential loss. That part of a grief process is healing; thus one can recover and conquer. Taken together, Annette and the zoo animals share a history of resilience power in their relationship. It shows how connection and holding lead to resilience, but it also acknowledges the peril of a sense of empowerment via relationships beyond us.

Annette calls these zoo animals her "babies," and we need to understand that despite other intentions they were still what formed part of living beings, but this mourning can be seen in the light on Spivak's theory of Subaltern. Spivak's theory draws extensively on the voices of women whose perspectives are often marginalized, particularly those in colonized or post-colonial cultural positions. Annette, another immigrant female character with a subaltern identity. This is mostly through her unconventional maternal instincts and caregiving of the animals she looks after which gives women power in a life where they are otherwise less listened to. It undoes our conventional understanding of empowerment, showing us how a wide range of oppressed individuals are able to carve out spaces for themselves and assert agency in their own lives. Annette's sorrow for the animals as her "babies" is paralleled with an attempt at showing subaltern resilience to adversities and loss. The forfeiture of Annette is not only a tragedy in her personal life, but represents more deeply the destruction and displacement suffered by marginalized groups. Her resilience in grieving and moving through this death is a byproduct of her upbringing, but also an act of resistance to being silenced.

Spivak argues that it is within these quiet, "unheard" narratives where this other voice can be redeemed so as to export from those discourses of power. Her profound relationship with the animals is not inherently political, however it reveals so much about her emotional strength and her capability to seek refuge and power in non-traditional pursuits. Through the character of Annette, Ahmad challenges readers to imagine different ways of being resilient and powerful that do not look like forms from a Western tradition. This corresponds to the Spivak's demand not for universalization but "to be prepared to inhibit selectively" so as better understand how subaltern subjects are still making their way through life, giving meaning. To wrap things up, Annette relationship to the zoo animals tells a story of resilience that attempt over empowerment - and all within subalternity as was seen through Spivak. Having listened to her the story, we must all expand our own conceptual toolkits and appreciates that there is a myriad of ways in which oppressed people make sense of themselves.

"Her mother had always stressed the dignity and value of reserve. A good woman she used to say, knows how to keep the family's secrets." (Ahmad 2014, p.151)



This lady is saying to her daughter, "keep the family secrets," is typical of a cultural desire for women to not just hide their pain but put on a face of being happy and drama-free no matter what your husband did or that she has lost another baby. Such repression eventually stifles internalized emotional pain and forsakes true feelings. Buck adds, "With her praise of dignity and value of reserve she falls into another traps: the echo that convinces girls they are how to talk, or what quality a woman must have. Women who internalize these norms may, in turn, feel closed off from their emotional experience and even guilty or ashamed when they do not live up to gendered expectations. The continuous suppression and what seems like the compulsion to smile through it all, added with trapped family secrets shuns women's mental wellbeing in remote phases. Women may develop symptoms of depression and anxiety -and other mental health issues- while attempting to reconcile their internal realities with the expectations being placed on them. These women feel an added layer of emotional pressure from the expectation to conform with traditional ideas of gender - and pressures towards heteronormative relationships. This was a well-meaning approach that simply reinforced an entire system of oppression rooted in misogyny and the repression - which it itself is responsible for creating -of authentic female emotional expression. The mother reinforces the patriarchal structures that contribute to women's cognitive and emotional dissonance by prioritizing the family's reputation over her daughter's wellbeing. By telling Nisa this, they ignore her as an individual person and only care about keeping family honor alive. The alienation and emotional distress that goes with making the world pay attention becomes part of this umbrella, as well those not recognizing or respecting her autonomy and feelings. It is pertinent to know that the mother would probably give such advice based on things she has experienced and what society expects from one gender or another. Though her views may be problematic, the way these take hold of an entire family and are passed on to following generations illustrates how difficult it is so-called cultural issues remain in a community. Its narrator details, in the prologue from "The Spell and the Everchanging Moon", a look into woeful feelings of women in patriarchal societies. It shows these pressures of not expressing suffocating feelings and the constant struggles. it reveals this constant battle to confirm with gender stereotypes & put family honor over personal well-being. The mother, who gives such advice out of a sense of cultural tradition, reinforces systematic oppression that not only harms women's psyches but in fact destroys them.

The Subaltern, as portrayed by Spivak, includes voices that are socially disadvantaged based on several factors including gender. What kind of humans would do such things and claim a noble nature for their actions? - Women living in patriarchal societies, detached from expression to then be oppressed as lesser beings. When Nisa told her mother that she was reluctant to read the article so as not to disrupt how "happy" they are, and asked whether she gets lost in these arguments too because of them herself or steered clear of feeling all alone. If you read the text, it talks about how society expects women to toughen up because of their underlying womanhood but do not like having cold-hearted women around. This advice is a recurring theme in an earlier episode where Nisa's mother emphasizes the female emotions can never carry more weight than her family's honor. This silence could be seen as a part of subaltern inability that is concerning language-to articulate what they suffer and their desires within so-called mainstream culture.

It can be described how the pressure for women to smile and "act ladylike" as emotional labor. This sort of work is rarely acknowledged and, more importantly in the context of this piece



- undersigned- it perpetuates traditional gender roles which can be harmful to women by setting up attitudinal frames that ultimately lead inward emotions. It also supports the notion that women should prioritize keeping peace in social relationships and protect family honor, even if it means suppressing her own feelings. Though it never actually talks about sexual preference, the text prompts us to think about how gendered and heteronormative standards of identity affect women's emotional practices. For those women who do not fit within typical heteronormative constraints, the embarrassment and shame associated with their sexual urges has contributed to an increasing psychological burden.

Here is some selected text from *The Spell* and the *Everchanging Moon*, which focuses on how women are silenced of their emotional experiences in a patriarchy. It points to the way that cultural messages and expectations can take an emotional toll on women, resulting in them bottling-up emotions while denying their true selves. Although the text captures a possible scene of resistance and resilience, we also need more in-depth storytelling about how women navigate their emotional resources - especially those further marginalized through gender identity and sexual orientation.

“She felt weary of her life. The skimping and the managing, the hard work and the violence and finally, the humiliating abuse of her body.” (Ahmad 2014, p.154)

The phrase sums up, very concisely and eloquently I might add, the total weight that Nisa must carry just because of how she is oppressed in so many diverse ways. This sense of exhaustion may go beyond weariness born from "labor" to be a direct emotional response and result form or the aggregate effect perhaps; constant reminders by the state in one way, among many others like having this life as ground zero for minimizing damage control- so over it's time that I just know only limit amount sapping energy with all hardship just get tired. Her use of the word "violence" and referred to as a "humiliating abuse of her body", illustrate just how much harm Nisa is subjected to at the hands (and will) within marriage. This abuse is not only a place in time, but it affects her at a much deeper level that results in the way she feels and sees herself. That weariness of Nisa smacks of someone well and good over her life her internalized societal obligations as a woman, wife, mother in conjunction with the brutal actuality of her circumstances has rendered her powerless. This disenchantment is understandable, for it must be noted that the patriarchal system has robbed her off all of agency and autonomy.

Nisa's fatigue is born in the insistencies on women to self-sacrifice, be docile and obedient of their husbands They only serve to create more fodder for insidious misogynist abuses-cum-protections, blackmail or entrapment - sometimes all-messages against survivors: You deserve what you have reaped and live with the consequences. Nisa continuing as a text that details how Nisa experiences emotion and journeys to an understanding of her own gender identity. Not only does a woman have to manage her own emotions herself, but she has likely also been tasked with managing the emotional labor of her husband and family at great expense - as is evident in this blog. This emotional baggage, coupled with the physical assault most definitely adds to her general fatigue. Their reference to Nisa's "exhausting labors" suggest the intersection of her experience. And this would make her arguably more economically dependent on the husband, too - potentially fewer options and greater vulnerability to abuse.

Nisa is tired, disillusioned and at a crossroads in her own realization. Realizing the emotional and mental price her current environment has on here is a necessary move towards



healing, possibly changes. The text doesn't clearly state Nisa's reluctance, but her fatigue implies a subtle shift. Realization of that suffering might then lead her to pursue agency, or freedom and power - whether through reaching out for help (from other abusers as well), by challenging the actions of her husband in some way and maybe even eventually leaving him. It describes the accumulating burden carried by women in oppressive circumstances. She speaks to the ways in which abuse can manifest as physical and emotional sickness, how society shapes our character for better or worse; but she also writes of remarkable resilience rising up from the spirit like a phoenix no matter how destructive an environment. The words also remind us to remember the relationship of women, and different experiences as well as an understanding that ways need be made for blossoming freedom from them.

Subalternity in Spivak's sense, being the individuals or groups of people who are marginalized and then defined out from all powerful structures. Thus, Nisa as a feminized form of physical abjection within the patriarchy has become entrenched in this problematic mould. She is then silenced and erased, as she has no voice in this story or power to resist her husband dominance. The expression "borne in silence" accentuates Nisa's private pain, which she keeps to herself. Such silence is not only a direct matter concerning the individual in question but also arises from societal mechanisms designed to suppress women under patriarchal norms and relegates them to live with acts of aggression that they should have spoken out about. This patriarchal silence keeps Nisa in pain but make sure it remains unaccounted, unseen so that her suffering never truly gets a chance to be heard or felt. This would also be relevant because it touches on the societal framework against which Nisa lives and how that affects her emotionally. Women are being trained by the patriarchal system to not complain and endure any suffering they experience. Nisa's stoicism and suffering through abuse is a display of this anticipated submission-a means to survive in a world that gave her so little power. The physical abuse Nisa suffered at the hands of those who she had "worked herself to death" for, serves as a concrete example both her societal double standard and patriarchal strategies. They will provide both physical and emotional labor - the latter being that their main responsibility is to manage all of their own emotions while also managing everyone else's, often at the expense of themselves. Such emotional labor is seldom recognized or respected, which has only served to more firmly entrench the subaltern hood of women.

At no point do we get to see things from her perspective - instead, all that are shared with us is what the narrator has observed, a matter which Spivak was critical of as sort saying "the subaltern cannot speak. The text barely alludes to Nisa's strength; it doesn't show her actively defying or confronting the violence. Spivak also stresses the role that agency and resistance play in the subaltern liberation struggle.

From the text in *The Spell* and the *Everchanging Moon* gives a perspective on Nisa's emotional struggle as a third-class women living under patriarchal rule. Her pain and twisted silencing, her servile female gender roles she must be seen to beautifully perform at all times for those with power over them not to destroy him. Although the text does not seem to openly portray resistance, it alludes that Nisa is a perpetrator who could be able and willing to break out of her oppression circle. Drawing from this analysis, informed by Spivak's theory of subaltern voice, it is argued that the narratives and voices of women who are deprived victims like Sohni should not be silenced rather given vulnerability neutral platform to express themselves in which they rightfully struggle for their agency.



“In her heart, Nisa wished she knew a spell that worked” (Ahmad 2014, p.158)

Nisa longs for a spell that will do what she needs it to, in the way people on screen and in books think they have control over things. Pakistani society is traditionally patriarchal in nature where women are socially, financially and emotionally dependent on men which not only limits their decision-making power but also undermines them as individuals. Infact, the commercial ends with Nisa asking for a spell, lamenting that in Pakistan, there are no 'quick and easy' solutions for women wanting to get out of marriages they've realized have gone bad. Many women are unable to seek help or exit abusive relationships due to social stigma, cultural taboos and inadequate legal protection. When few options exist, for example some resort to traditional rooted-in-time beliefs and practices such as charms. The seductive appeal of magical thinking in times when we are desperate and powerless is laid bare. However, they can also be a means of escapism and delay the acknowledgement that we need to address underlying problems instead of clinging blindly onto beliefs. The fact that even Nisa wishes for a spell to better her marital life travels off the beaten path, hinting at how women are often conditioned into falling victim to social spaces and molds of what an ideal marriage is expected by them. In our society in particular, female worth is almost always linked to a wife and mother agitating for an immaculate house. Fear of failure or even divorce leads women to desperate acts even if that includes magical beliefs.

For Spivak, the subaltern theory describes those who were oppressed and omitted from power relations. Likewise, Nisa as a woman caught in the gears of a patriarchal machine represents the subaltern. She wants a magical solution because such is the extent of her agency and resources as a woman trapped in that situation. The recourse to a spell is Nisa's subaltern mode of survival and coping. Faced with the continued inability of institutionalized solutions and alternatives to help, she takes refuge in traditional dual natures as a way for her to regain even minimal agency on significant facts about herself. The text is an implicit criticism of the mainstream discourse, which such as dismisses or makes light women experiences and struggles. The text picks up on this in Nisa's desperate search for a fix, capturing the simple and literal ingredient it should be adding to that recipe: as long as women feel their problems can always be solved by traditional means then there is no need to address them properly - including female desire. It is a quote from *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon*, - one which encapsulates the desperation, hope and desire for agency that so many women in Pakistan experience. That will display the few choices they have and also show you why magical thinking is such an appealing concept in the face of adversity that seems to be impossible. Although no solution is formulated by the text, it questions powerful as Active agents in restraining women to options and asks for better resourcing support services with a more holistic perspective of women's needs.

The subaltern in Spivak's take, alludes to the individuals or groups who are excluded from dominant power structures and removed off into periphery. Historically, in Pakistan this site of subalternity is normally occupied by women being rooted within the womb of gendered patriarchal norms and living under cultural constraints along with scarce resources available to them. In this scenario Nisa - very contemporary culturally illiterate woman whose marriage is on the rocks and dreams about what her life might look like with a little agency, becomes symbols for all the subalterns. The desire for a 'quick fix' was symptomatic of her position on the outside, willing to do anything for different.



First, the text is about Nisa and her singular wish for a spell, so it fits into Spivak's notion of subaltern agency. It does not deal with collective action - a virtual impossibility according to Spivak for the empowerment of subaltern women without an addressal on this scale. Desiring of a spell from Nisa might be perceived, rather than as an active resistance; it is but passive hope. Although it shows a hunger to stand up, an urge that will not automatically be turned into action against the oppressive structures controlling her life. This quote is a reflection of struggles Pakistan women go through specially in unhappy or abusive marriages. Nisa wishing for a magical way to solve the problem reflects wants, needs and requests but also desperation: groove constrained vs. agency box arguments It is itself a criticism of the prevailing structures that have not given her appropriate solutions. But the text is so concerned with virtuous individual agency and Nisa's able or not resist, that we can deduce its scope - at best little behavioral changes inside some families. Ultimately, the quote does a great job of bringing to light some of the difficulties faced by women in Pakistan and talking about meaningful changes that could have positive effects on their lives

5. Findings, Discussion and Conclusion

Through a multifaceted presentation of the lives of Pakistani women who live in a socially limiting, patriarchal society, Rukhsana Ahmad conveys a thought-provoking discussion in the short stories. Her writings especially *The Gatekeeper Wife* and *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon* and *The Nightmare* give a lot of insight into the emotional, cultural and psychological plight women go through. The themes of displacement, trauma, resilience and constant negotiation of identity are stressed in these narratives. In Ahmad's *The Gatekeeper Wife* (2014), the main character Annette who is a foreign woman taken in marriage to the Pakistani tradition uses her attachment to the animals at the zoo to provide solace to herself, trying to find a way to connect with someone. Her narrative illustrates the effects of cultural displacement and hierarchical relationships in marriage experiencing the self and the feeling of independence. The same can be applied to *The Spell and the Everchanging Moon*, where Nisa, a young girl, hears advice given to her by an older lady, and this woman is a source of knowledge and emotional support. The fact that Nisa uses dreaming and mysticism as a method of opposition to antagonistic norms represents small defiance. In *Nightmare*, Fariha deals with the trauma related to the earlier abuse, and her repeated dreams are viewed as the manifestation of her emotions which were never reconciled. The struggles of traditional gender roles and how women rebel against or submit to their situations are highlighted in the stories by Ahmad. Characters such as Mumtaz and Annette are those who break the categories they have been assigned, whereas Nisa and Fariha, rich and based in lower social classes, are more susceptible, without a lot of resources, education, and control. The narratives also bring out the influence of structural inequality on mental wellbeing, identity, and social status. Cultural alienation is a common theme of emotional burden. The feeling of alienation expressed by Annette echoes the challenges women have to endure when attempting to become a part of an unknown society. The lack of access to justice and social support is also reflected in the experiences of such characters as Nisa and Fariha, who can display the failures of the welfare system. Ahmad unveils the ways in which violence, financial enslavement, and social norms of rigidity hamper women in their independence still today. Nevertheless, there is resilience represented in the stories, not through great revolution, but through small subversion, emotional expression, and the ability to find sources of support. Ahmad makes these individual experiences very much resonate with the voices of women who otherwise would have been silenced by the



society, making people question issues of gender, power, and identity. This is an eye opener for women right activists too.

5.1 Recommendations

In future research, an intersectional approach should be applied to learn more about the way gender interacts with class, ethnicity, and religion when forming the reality of Pakistani women. It is also important that research looks at day to day types of resistance and resilience, and the influence of cultural and religious interpretations on gender roles. In order to understand the long-term psychological consequences of systemic barriers, we would consider doing longitudinal studies. Moreover, interventions of gender equity could be based on policy-oriented research. Lastly, comparative studies and receptions studies with international postcolonial texts would enrich the perspective of Ahmad work in the larger sense of literary and feminist studies.

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