Blue Roses for Women: Textualization of Self in Pakistani Women's Vernacular Short Fiction

Mirza Muhammad Zubair Baig

Abstract

The present research paper is based on the compiled volume of Pakistani women's short fiction translated from the major vernaculars of country into English. These short stories noticeably encourage the women to be vocal about their issues and write their silences back erstwhile muffled in the traditional Pakistani society. These writings respond to Cixous's call to write a *woman*, make her public through writing and narrativize her personal self that would enable her to reclaim her body back from patriarchy. These fictional writings trace back the tough journey of vulnerable Pakistani women since the historical moments of partition of India and creation of Pakistan. The women have put on a brave face to the difficult and hard times of dictatorial rules. The study reveals that the women have been beset historically, politically, socially, and locally with the communal biases, political conflicts, social constraints and local myths. Most of the stories are descriptive of women's suffering though very few of them challenge the patriarchal structures and invite women to resist them. The close reading of the texts shows that the fictional selves and their textualization correlate with the real life women. The existing parochial social and cultural milieu in the present day Pakistan has worsened the life of an ordinary woman due to the absence of social justice. Even in the postcolonial times, women lack institutional support. The stories consistently build the argument that the Pakistani society is still rooted in the age-old social taboos, patriarchal customs, structured mores, paternal norms, and feminine archetypes which, collectively, are like *poisonous blue roses* for a woman.

Keywords: *gender, patriarchy, textualization, reclamation*

Introduction

The current study is based on *Women's Writings* (1994)[1], a special issue of English biannual magazine *Pakistani Literature* that is published by the Pakistan Academy of Letters. The academy works for the promotion of Pakistani languages, literatures and women of letters. *Women's Writings* is the compilation of Pakistani women writers' short fiction originally written in the major Pakistani vernaculars and later translated into English language. The present research paper synthesizes the divergent experiences of women to weave the voices of different women together into a colorful tapestry. These female-authored narratives reflect on the structured silence of a traditional Pakistani woman. The "Foreword"

acknowledges that the selected writings foreground “feminine sensibility, depicting the intellectual and emotional landscape of Pakistani women writers” (p. 13). Later on, the editors express the limitation of the volume and relate that these voices are not “necessarily” feminist (p. 16). The feminist reading of these stories shows that the anthology primarily accommodates the various feminine voices. The writers try to raise female consciousness through writing. These fictional stories address the factual concerns and genuine problems of Pakistani women. Many real life incidents, events and stories in the society make these fictional characters come alive. The Pakistani woman is still putting up with the societal taboos, stereotypes and fixity. Yasmin Marri, one of the writers, explains that the mythical blue roses are deadly poisonous and are comparable to the societal traditions, customs, laws and norms which are equally venomous for women. Paradoxically, the journey of women characters is strewn with blue roses all their way instead of the traditional red roses associated with muliebrity.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is primarily informed by the French post-structuralist and feminist thinker Cixous’s (1976) theorizing of women’s writing. She enjoins a woman that she should “write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (p. 875). By textualizing their selves, the women have responded to Hanisch’s slogan, “personal is political” (as cited in Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005, p. 116). They have narrativized their personal lives and acknowledged the beauty of their “bodily functions” (p. 876). They voiced their concerns, and made themselves public in order to gain their political, biological and social rights. The reclamation of their bodies by Pakistani women writers is likely to encourage the other “unacknowledged sovereigns” to record their sufferings and discover a “*new insurgent*” within (p. 876). Though most of the women characters remain vulnerable to the social institutions, yet very few subversive characters make some of these writings as “female-sexed texts” that openly challenge and override the patriarchal assumptions in the attempt to confront the patriarchal violence (p. 877).

Barring women from writing their own body experiences for themselves is the worst type of patriarchal violence since it furthers antinarcissist agenda of “antilove” that makes women hate what they have and cherish what they lack (p. 878). These women writers have braved the shame associated with the body through the textualization and

narrativization of the real self. They seem to have turned away for the Sirens who are actually men to look straight on to the beautiful and laughing woman Medusa in order to find new meaning and renew images (p. 885). Cixous suggests that the women can only break the institutional structures if they tend to their body and write through it in order to "break up the "truth" with laughter" as Medusa did (p. 888). Writing about her "womanly being" and sexuality erstwhile tabooed as "personal" by the patriarchal culture provides a woman with the access to her inborn strengths.

These Pakistani writers have triumphed over the "torment of getting up to speak" by voicing and documenting their concerns, and interrupted to some extent the phallogocentric Pakistani culture (p. 880). They have recorded the gendered, social, political, historical, biological, physiological and economic aspects of a woman's personal self in these writing. Though the characters could not subvert the vindictive patriarchal law completely yet they have raised consciousness among the readers on how important it is to write and reclaim their bodies, history and self.

Writing a Woman in Pakistani Short Fiction

The fourteen selected stories in this research paper have embodied diverse experiences of women from the third world postcolonial country Pakistan, and documented the estranged husband and wife relationship in "And he had an accident," problematic early marriages and health issues in "Descent," the stigmatized story of troupes and a whore in "Munni Bibi at the Fair," the abduction of women during communal riots in "Farewell to the Bride" and "Banishment," the economically impoverished women in "The Naked Hens," the tumultuous married life of a political activist in "To be or not to be," the saga of brave old woman in "Testimony," the troubled marital life of a woman with impotent husband in "The Cow," the harrowing story of a child rape in "The Magic Flower," the story of an unwanted birth in the war-torn region in "The Valley of Doom," the life of a mad woman on streets in "Dilshada," the coerced marriages in "The Poison of the Blue Rose," and the woman's claim to her body in "The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon."

To begin with, in the Urdu short story "And he had an accident," the writer Hijab Imtiaz Ali tells the story of a man whose mother first hated Munnoo, a puppy, but later accepted it out of pity only when it was run over by a bicycle on the road. Likewise, the narrator's wife Feroza tolerates his friend Ahmad who meets an accident when his craft is overturned at sea. The interesting point is how the writer compares and contrasts his mother with his wife "Who would tolerate a woman who did not resemble his mother in some ways? . . . although seemingly alike they were still dissimilar" (p. 24). His similarity stance, "like mother, like wife," is based on

the empirical evidence that his mother accepted the dog and her wife a friend after they met an accident. Metaphorically, he has lost his wife and is feeling lonely and estranged. He is temporarily relegated to a condition related to widowhood what Emile Durkheim terms as "Acute domestic anomie" that is a type of crisis experienced by a widow or a widower after the death of his or her counterpart and results into offering "less resistance to suicide" by the surviving spouse (Thompson, 2002, p. 112). Platt and Salter (1987) have also worked on parasuicidal tendencies in this connection and found that parasuicide is an "attention-seeking behavior" (p. 207). Though the man in the story does not actually want to die yet his self- immolation may be interpreted as a behavior seeking his wife's attention. He jumps over the building to seek his wife's sympathy and end his loneliness.

Mumtaz Shirin in her short story, "Descent," narrates the story of an impoverished couple. The writer boldly depicts the pangs of stillbirth that a poor woman experiences. The woman in her labor forebears "more intermittent and more severe" pain shooting "through her spine, her hips, her belly." The excruciating pain is accompanied with "cold shivers" and "perspiration" (p. 26). The twenty five years old wife's body completely lost its "physical attraction" (p. 29). The writer shares how patriarchy indoctrinates a woman about a husband. A husband is an adorable "lord" worthy to be worshipped and a wife should devote her life to "his service." Similarly, a wife is a "delicate being" given to his "care" through marriage bond. The wife is destined to be "the mistress of his house, the mother of his children" (p. 29). The husband's poverty failed him as a protector since his wife got poor medical facilities during her pregnancy. The writer compares the miserable family life of a "petty clerk" whose wife could not afford injections, tonics and fruits with "the few chosen" women in the "special wards" (pp. 30-31). Though the wife was transfused with his blood, yet she could not survive because of her ever failing health aggravated by "hard work and childbearing" (p. 33). Her corpse was withheld by the hospital till the payment of the bills. He had ascended the stairs of the hospital with his living wife at the start of the story but now he was descending them with "her lifeless body" (p. 33). The writer relates the bad health of the wife to her early age marriage consummated while she was barely "fourteen" years old. UNICEF (1998) has researched on teenage brides from 53 countries and observed higher mortality rates in mothers and babies since "teenage bodies are not ready for the rigours of pregnancy or childbirth" (*The progress of nations,* p. 27). A study on adolescent marriages versus economic disparity of the families finds a positive relationship between the child marriages and poverty. It reveals that the rate of child marriage in poor families is approximately three times higher than in the rich families. The young brides run the risk of

"premature childbearing, high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity and high levels of child undernutrition" (*The state of the world's children 2011,* p. 12). The study also investigates the existing link between the premature bodies and hazards of overbearing pregnancy that often leads to maternal mortality (*The State of the world's children 2011,* p. 30). Another study reports that Pakistan (46.1 per 1,000 births) has been recorded to have the highest stillbirth rate in the South Asia in 2009 (Ledger & Clark, 2014, p. 53).

"Munni Bibi at the Fair" by Hajra Masroor narrates the story of a little girl Munni Bibi. She is taken by her servant Kamal at the fair in the absence of her father. When the father returns home and knows about the visit, he scolds Kamal and exclaims, "You dare to invite troupes in my absence and expose womenfolk of my house to this trash" (p. 36). The children in the town threaten Munni with eternal damnation and hold that "all those who had given coins to the dancer would be punished in hell by having red-hot coins plastered over their bodies" at the Day of Judgment (p. 37). Her mother also grumbles at her habit of buying fragile toys that break down in no time and are, thus, wastage of money. Contrastively, Munni does not give in and again dreams of going to fair. The narrator shares that "Today her mother had no control over her dreams" (p. 39). Cixous (1976) objectifies silence in women as resistance reflected through dreams and writes that "[m]uted throughout their history, they (women) have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts" (p. 886). Munni's unconquerable and insuperable dreams are also in utter revolt to her father's forewarnings. On her second visit to the fair with Kamal, they visit a woman, "a whore" who treats her own child and makes a doll with her own hands for her (p. 45). The doll with "the full-bosom" is burnt down into ashes when the family comes to know about the rendezvous (p. 46). The possible reason for the negative image of a dancing woman at the fair is that the women from red light areas were used for sex, dancing and singing in the colonial India (Brown, 2009). Saeed (2001) has worked on the women art performers and notes how these professional women working in theaters are culturally and socially associated with prostitution in Pakistan. She offers a different picture of these women and gives the example of Bali Jatti, a theatrical performer, who has never been a prostitute but still was "stigmatized" for the stereotypical image (p. xviii). Likewise, the family in the story visualizes the doll with its full bosom gifted by a 'prostitute' to the child as an artifact that reveals the lascivious intentions of its maker. However, Saeed's study dispels the impression of a woman performer at fair associated with a whore. The dancer's motherly feelings have been misinterpreted because of her stigmatized image. Eating eggs and taking tea is a "total taboo" for the girls of Munni's age in the house since, according to her aunt, the eggs

are rich source of energy and heat that accelerates puberty (p. 40). It is interesting to note that egg eating by a girl is associated with greed and licentiousness even in some African societies (Cassel, 1955, p. 27).

"Farewell to the Bride" by Khadija Mastoor is written in the backdrop of Pak-India partition, and the resultant mass movement, communal riots, bloodbath and ethnic cleansing on both side of the border. The male narrative voice in the story recalls the pain of a "fateful day" of riots when the rioters are struck by the soapy water running out of drain of an otherwise locked house (p. 47). Death in those days was experienced an omnipotent force that rated human life cheap and the human beings as insects crawling out of "this web of death" (p. 47). The narrator failed to reason with the growling mob that was ready to pounce upon the victim. They did not listen to the narrator's call for sanity and humanity because their own folks were being butchered across the border (p. 48). They finally found out a beautiful girl wailing and waiting for her husband to claim her as his bride (p. 49). The mob forcibly took her away and he failed to respond to her "silent appeal for help" (p. 50). Anguished and distressed at his inability to rescue her, he stayed in her room where he finds a letter that promises a reunion at every cost but the vengeance and fury claims her way before her lover could have arrived (p. 51). The historical and archival evidence supports that the most vulnerable victims in such communal attacks have been invariably women. Major (1995) observes that the communal outrage victimized chiefly the women. He explains that sometimes the death was awarded to women by their own male family members in an attempt to protect their honor threatened by the immanent "molestation, rape, mutilation, abduction, forcible conversion, marriage and death" by the men of rival community (p. 58). Khosla (1989) also records the statement of an observer who watched the abduction of young Muslim women by the armed Sikhs in the presence of military sepoys in the East Punjab when the caravan of Muslim families proceeded from Kapurthala to Jullunder. The observer affirms that "by the time the column arrived at Jullunder almost all the women and young girls had been kidnapped in this manner" (p. 289). Similarly, the abducted Hindu and Sikh women by the Muslims in the Western Punjab were never recovered (Brard, 2007, p. 132). Ghadially (1988) notes that patriarchy in northern India has used rape as a tool of violence to set scores with the rivals and terms rape as "power rape"— an empowering act for the patriarchy (p. 149). Major (1995), however, finds substantial evidence how common men tried to rescue women in danger at the risk of their life (p. 61). The massacre and abduction of women both in Indian and Pakistani part of Punjab is reflective of the state failure on either side of the border. The new dominions of Pakistan and India failed to protect their minorities.

Likewise, “Banishment” by Jamila Hashmi is the story of a Muslim girl who is abducted during the partition of Indian Subcontinent by a Hindu male named Gurpal who later on forcibly marries her. She lives a life of an exile in her erstwhile homeland India and is colonized in the postcolonial era. Whenever she is called *Bahu* (daughter-in-law) by the captive family, she finds abuse of this sacred word and her self. She recalls the terrible night when she fell into Gurpal’s hands, and he presented her proudly to his grandmother whose eyes inspected her thoroughly as if she were an animal brought home by her grandson (p. 53). She visualizes herself as *Seeta* who also had been through the ordeals of banishment (p. 54). Where the *Seetaji* of Hindu mythology had reunion with her husband *Ramchandra* after living in pains of exile, the Muslim girl is not rescued from the antagonist Gurpal by her *Bhai* (brother) from across the border unlike the protagonist of *Ramayana*, a great Hindu epic. She could leave her husband but not her daughter born out of forced marriage. Munni now has a nose ring in one of her nostrils (p. 55). Dar (1969) documents the costumes of India and Pakistan and explains the symbolic significance of wearing of nose-ring by a virgin. A maiden takes it off with loss of her virginity at the consummation of marriage (p. 161). Her daughter Munni stood in her way and she could not escape. She has no answer to her daughter’s complicated question about her uncle’s never visiting them even on auspicious events like Divali (p. 62). Her Ma (mother) accepts her fate like *Seeta* who submitted to the will of fate and lived with *Rawan*, the kidnapper and antagonist of the Hindu mythology (p. 67). She knows hopelessly that there is no homecoming in the history of forced marriages, converts, rapes and sexual violence done in the name of faith and God (p. 63). She was kidnapped on her own *“motherland”* (p. 64). The soldiers of the “other country” newly created Pakistan traced her to rescue but she is torn apart in choosing either her role as the beloved sister or as a mother (p. 65). Major (1995) states that the Pakistanis Central Recovery Officers claimed that they met with non-Muslims in India who refused to reclaim their taken away women on the excuse that they had been “defiled” (p. 66).

Altaf Fatima in “The Naked Hens” underscores the plight and burden of a working Pakistani woman both as an earning hand and a housewife (p. 75). Haeri (2002) describes the uneven competitive atmosphere between Pakistani men and professional Pakistani women since the women have to struggle on several fronts along with their professional commitments (p. xi). She later explains the “struggle” as “some kind of conflict with one’s family, husband, lineage, and various social institutions” (p. xxix). Fatima visualizes an ill-provided and impoverished woman as vulnerable to patriarchy as is a hen on a skewer ready to be roasted. The class consciousness intensified by the fashion

industry and designer fashion fabric has made dressing oneself up considerably difficult. The women in the story are roaming about like naked hens looking around to buy "costly fabrics" (p. 79). The image of "naked" hen refers to the vulnerability of women who are no better than "living corpses" if they do not have enough money to buy the "silky" clothes. The oxymoron "living corpses" explains how mechanical the life of a working woman is. She has to work hard to get the necessities of life. The "silken" clothes are for these creamy and soft bodies of "corpses" (p. 79). Fatima narrates the story of an unknown mother and daughter in the cloth market. The writer knowingly keeps them unnamed in the story since anonymity historically has been women's known tradition (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 12). Mother's empty purse in the cloth market makes her "persona non grata" (p. 81). The daughter's smile to the winking boy reminds the narrator of his purchasing power. He can buy her anything she could name in return for her nakedness (p. 82). Fatima sees through his wink and visualizes the girl's dress being stripped off her body (p. 83). Ditmore (2006) records the life and problems of street prostitutes in Pakistan who work "in exchange for goods" (p. 451). The writer compares the cushioned life of elitist women with the impoverished mother and daughter. Not knowing how to help them out, the narrator tries to persuade the folks to at least lower their gaze and not to stare at the explicit bodies that cannot afford to "drape" themselves (p. 83).

"To be or not to be" by Zahida Hina is the story of a political activist woman who proves to be a "Trojan Horse" for her friends for the doings of her husband who is an army man and quells a political movement launched against the oppressive regime. She is ignorant of the fact that his husband has played a key role in exposing the political activities of many of her friends who were later tortured to death by the regime (p. 113). Jalal (1991) has also studied the autocratic regime in Pakistan and finds evidence of state-sponsored oppression against women's public visibility and activities (p. 77). Unlike her brother, she failed to assess that an army man was a mismatch to her political and democratic ambitions. She knows only when she overhears her husband's friend pointing out incongruities in the personalities of husband and wife. Her imprisoned friends stand in contrast with the medal that the husband received for their incarceration (p. 112). Her friends are the true followers of Socrates who are ready to drink their "cup of poison" (p. 112). The state uses violence to dispense with *justice*. The rulers entitle themselves the status of God's caliphs to dispense justice the way that suits their interests (p. 114). Bhavnani and Barbara (1996) elucidate that women's resistance in politics or within communities has been taken as rebellion against the state, nationhood, and patriarchal structures and has been dealt with severity (p. x). The wife is now caught up in a situation where she is to

decide how to resist the oppressive troika of state, nationhood and patriarchy. Her husband's treachery makes her drink a "cup of poison" in order to stand up for justice and her comrades' basic fundamental rights.

Likewise, an old woman faces the same dilemma in another story, "Testimony" by Afzal Tauseef. She resolves to stand up against the oppressive regime when the men failed to. She rises up to protect the men of soil. The story describes the dystopian autocratic rule exemplified by the "dingy cells of the Old Fort," and "summary military courts" (p. 151). The victims face confiscation, stringent imprisonment, flogging and death sentence (p. 151). The "weak lonely woman" is forced by the regime to give a false testimony in return for her son's life and daughter's honor (p. 157). She carries forward her ancestor's legacy of defiance in the face of evil. She weighs her son's life and daughter's honor against the life of "very few lion-hearted men left," and resolves to save the honor of the land by speaking the truth (p. 156). She, finally, revolts against the Gestapo and its "hyena-faced men" when the male witnesses submit to the coercive measures (p. 159). After her triumphing over fear and giving the true testimony, she feels "born anew" (p. 161). She perpetuates her name by saving the sons of soil while the other male witnesses live a life-in-death after giving false testimony and sending "seven freedom fighters to the gallows" (p. 161). Hensman (2005) also acknowledges the women's strength and capability to stand up against authoritarian politics in contrast with their men who show weakness in similar circumstances (p. 66).

In "The Cow" by Firdous Haider, the woman narrator advocates a woman's right to her body and sexuality. She explains a woman's fecundity and compulsive desire to procreate by giving the example of a cow. She reminds the readers how a cow's bellowing is indicative of its "intense" longing for mating (p. 127). The cow with "an instinctive passion to create" breaks free when it wants to "conceive" (p. 127). Likewise, the narrator is first married off to the man not of her choice. Her infertile husband behaves like an acclaimed god because he cannot afford to be stigmatized and "degraded" as an impotent man in society (Ellis & Abarbanel, 2013). On her wedding night, "the mother of all nights," she realizes how the "moments that were to be created in its wombs were crucified" (p. 128). However, she refuses to succumb to this exploitation and would not kill "the woman inside" who like an opened-up shell wants a drop that embodies a pearl. In the story, the man refuses to "let go of the cow" since it would compromise his manliness and virility (p. 129). She refuses to live with the Platonic idea of love promoted through folklores like Shirin-Farhad in which Farhad cracks open the mountain and carves out a canal of milk from there to attest his love for the beloved Shirin. Nothing can

break down her intense desire to “create” (p. 129). She analogizes her mating desire and power of procreation with the estrous cycle of a cow that asks for the “revelation for the *drop*” (p. 129). She gets inseminated out of marital bond when she fails to live a destined life of celibacy and denial. Nasir (2009) documents Islamic point of view on the impotence of a spouse that gives a woman right to take divorce if her husband lacks the ability to consummate marriage (p. 142). However, the lack of awareness and social justice makes a woman vulnerable to such types of forced relationships.

Parveen Malik’s “The Magic Flower” is the story of a school going girl Sakina whose mouth is “drawn to one side” since her babyhood when her mother gave her a grain of opium and left her asleep under a shady tree to harvest grain but the shade soon disappeared and the intense heat deformed her face (p. 162). Since then, Sakina faces body shaming in the society and is called “crooked flute” by her playmates (p. 163). The school helper Mai Nekan would narrate the wonder stories to the girls. Once Sakina asks Mai Nekan if someone who has the magic flower can transform her face as it happens in the stories but Mai evades the question (p. 164). One night, she goes to the graveyard to take the promised magic flower from a man but is raped by the smiling beasts. As Cixous (1976) encourages women to “bring women to writing,” the writer of the story overrides guilt and conquers the shame associated with the rape victim (p. 875). Cixous also shares her difficulty in overpowering her fear to write women and states “I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear” (p. 876). Sex education is a taboo in Pakistani society, and the girls are not mentally prepared against the potential sexual assault that is rarely punished in view of legal complications, flaws in judicial proceedings, faulty preservation of evidence, and inefficient medical system (Burney, 1999, p. 61).

Noor-ul-Huda Shah’s “The Valley of Doom” is about a mother who refuses to abort her child in a war-torn land visualized as death ridden “hell” by the husband (p. 171). The husband forewarns her regarding the severity of life in that region. She would either go crazy or commit suicide (p. 172). She hates him for his pessimism and inability to protect the mother and the child. She has an optimistic view of life. She plans to counter the violence on the land by giving birth to the “flowering beauty” in her womb that would extinguish fire in the region (p. 174). She explores the possibility of peace in the birth of a child that is “wonder of life” which defies annihilation (p. 174). In this story, the visionary woman upholds the promise to peace, stability, regeneration and life. The man cannot understand her view on life and makes her parts her ways with him.

“Dilshada” by Zaitoon Bano is a story from Pushto vernacular that frames an insane looking woman Dilshad who sold her son Qamar Gul for one *anna* (sixteenth part of a rupee). She lived an unnoticeable life in the public since a woman’s enormous experience of oppression and suppression keeps her in the “dark” (Cixous, 1976, p. 876). The repressed Dilshad spends her nights in unprotected streets trying to sleep on the wooden planks. She has to stay vigilant of her chastity against “some bastards” (180). Dilshad has been sold to her husband by her father worth fifteen hundred rupees but, as the ill luck would have it, the husband was allegedly killed by his step brothers. She gives birth to the orphan Qamar Gul at the time when the eldest brother enslaved her and married her “by force” (p. 181). Qamar Gul’s life has been under threat over the division of family assets so she makes her way from Tirah to Peshawar where, finding no other way to protect him, she sells her son to an opulent lady for a false coin of *anna*. Later, she loses her son for good when that family shifts to Karachi.

In “The Poison of the Blue Rose” by Yasmin Marri, the narrator and Gulab bibi both could not marry the persons of their choice in traditional Pakistani society where women are mostly betrothed to men of families’ choice. She finds an understanding of life towards the end of the story that the men and women doomed in arranged marriages are “poisoned roses.” Though mythically a blue rose blossoms in a hundred-year time yet here in the society, “every moment blue roses flower” (p. 187). She has used the metaphor of “blue” rose for the sufferings, pangs and dismal life of a Pakistani woman in society. The women’s submission to their parents’ choice is understandable since a woman’s attempt to marry by her choice in Pakistan results in violence and often causes the death of the couple even if the courts allow them to marry and live together (*State of human rights in Pakistan*, p. 209).

In “The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon” by Rukhsana Ahmed, a woman named Nisa who visits “house of evil” where the blasphemous occult is practiced by Talat and advised to the wretched women with social problems and family pressures (pp. 200-201). Talat disguised as an occult practitioner with “two huge black snakes entwined round her body” takes money from the visitors and gives them hope in return (p. 201). She prescribes Nisa to give a drop of her own menstrual blood to her recalcitrant husband to drink. This magical blood would cast a spell on the drinker and enslave him (p. 204). She could not perform this sacrilegious rite and later on it was known that Talat was a fraud. In the story, her drunkard husband Hameed tortured her mentally and abused her physically in the name of conjugal rights. She loathes the household labor and child nursing in return for the “housekeeping allowance” (p. 206).

When she can no longer bear the domestic violence, she asserts her right to her body and refuses that to him. She is called a “wayward” woman since she is not allowed to do it on social and religious grounds. Her husband violates him in other violent ways to desecrate the “newly found veneration of her body” but Nisa feels quite empowered and triumphed (p. 208). She prefers the physical beatings and bruises to “humiliating sex” (p. 208). Cixous (1976) also informs women that their body is the center of power, “A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” (p. 880). She listens to Cixous (1976) who reminds women of the fact that “your body is yours, take it” so she reclaims it from her husband (p. 876). Nisa becomes a fighter, revolts at the end of the story and goes back to her mother’s house.

Conclusion

Most of the Pakistani women writers have braved the shame and stigma associated with writing their body experiences. They describe the sufferings of Pakistani women in the present short fiction and very few characters like Balochi woman overtly challenge the rooted patriarchal structures. By excavating the stories from the partition-time to the present day Pakistan, the women reiterate that they have been a victim of creative violence. By writing back to the taboos and silencing culture, they have reclaimed their right to their bodies. Their heightened consciousness to the violence, oppression, and repression inflicted on women by men in the present day Pakistan paves the way for the women from the marginalized strata of society to come together and resist the structural violence.

Notes

[1]As all the short stories cited in-text are from the same source—*Pakistani Literature: Special Issue Women’s Writings* published by the Pakistan Academy of Letters Islamabad, and edited by Fakhar Zaman and Ifitkhar Arif, so only the page numbers are given wherever primary text is quoted in order to save the text from year-author laden citation.

References

Bhavnani, K., & Barbara, S. (2005). Series preface. In A. Haleh (Ed.), *Women and politics in the third world* (pp. x-xi) (2nd ed.) London: Routledge.

Brard, G. S. S. (2007). *East of Indus: My memories of old Punjab*. New Delhi: Hemkunt Publishers.

Brown, L. (2009). *The dancing girls of Lahore: Selling love and saving dreams in Pakistan's ancient pleasure district*. London: Harper Perennial.

Burney, S., & Human Rights Watch (Organization). (1999). *Crime or custom?: Violence against women in Pakistan*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Cassel, J. (1955). A comprehensive health program among South African Zulus. In B. D. Paul (Ed.), *Health, culture, and community: Case studies of public reactions to health programs* (pp.15 – 41). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Cixous, H. (1976). The laugh of the medusa. (K. Cohen & P. Cohen, Trans.). *Signs*, *1*(4), 875–893.

Dar, S. N. (1969). *Costumes of India and Pakistan: A historical and cultural study*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons.

Ditmore, M.H. (2006). *Encyclopedia of prostitution and sex work*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

Ellis, A., & Abarbanel, A. (2013). *The encyclopaedia of sexual behavior: Volume 1*. Saint Louis: Elsevier Science.

Ghadially, R. (1988). *Women in Indian society: A reader.* Delhi: Sage Publications.

Haeri, S. (2002). *No shame for the sun: Lives of professional Pakistani women*. New York, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Heilbrun, C. G. (1988). *Writing a woman's life*. New York: Norton.

Hensman, R. (2005). The role of women in the resistance to political authoritarianism in Latin America and South Asia. In Haleh, A., (Ed.), *Women and politics in the third world* (pp. 50-75) (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Jalal, A. (1991). Convenience of subservience: Women and the state of Pakistan. In D. Kandiyoti (Ed.), *Women, Islam and the state* (pp. 77-114). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Khosla, G. D. (1989). *Stern reckoning: A survey of the events leading up to and following the partition of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ledger, W. L., & Clark, J. (2014). *Recent advances in obstetrics & gynaecology*. London: JP Medical Ltd.

Major, A. J. (1995). 'The chief sufferers': Abduction of women during the partition of the Punjab. *South Asia*, *XVIII*, 57-72.

Nasir, J. J. (2009). *The status of women under Islamic law and modern Islamic legislation*. Leiden: Brill.

Platt , S., & Salter , D. (1987). A comparative investigation of health workers' attitudes towards parasuicide. *Social Psychiatry, 22*, 202-208.

Saeed, F. (2001). *Taboo!: The hidden culture of a red light area.* Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Selden, R., Widdowson. P., & Brooker, P. (2005). *A reader's guide to contemporary literary theory*. London: Pearson Education Ltd.

State of human rights in Pakistan. (2006). Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

The progress of nations: The nations of the world ranked according to their achievements in fulfillment of child rights and progress for women : 1998. New York, NY: UNICEF.

The state of the world's children 2011, adolescence: An age of opportunity, United Nations children's fund. New York: UNICEF.

Thompson, K. (2002). *Emile Durkheim* (Rev. ed.). Chichester: E. Horwood.

Zaman, F., & Ifitkhar, A. (Eds.). (1994). *Pakistani literature: Special issue women's writings*. Islamabad: The Pakistan Academy of Letters.