

## PROBLEMATIC REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY OF PAKISTANI WOMEN IN LAHORE WITH LOVE IN POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Fawzia Afzal-Khan's representation of Pakistani Muslim women in her memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style*. It critiques how Afzal-Khan constructs and represents the identities of Pakistani Muslim women, arguing that despite claiming to be a feminist, she often fails to respect the choices of other women. Instead, Afzal-Khan criticizes these women based on their religious beliefs, political views, and national contexts. Julia Kristeva's theoretical perspectives on feminism, identity, and representation provide the primary analytical framework for this critique. Kristeva challenges traditional feminist frameworks that promote fixed, monolithic notions of 'woman' or 'feminine,' arguing that such views exclude the individuality of many women. She advocates for a politics of individuals rather than groups, emphasizing the importance of representing each person regardless of their sex, ethnicity, class, or other defining factors. Kristeva criticizes the imposition of rigid feminist ideals that demand conformity from women (such as not having children) as a prerequisite for their rights, viewing this as another form of repression replacing patriarchal norms. In light of Kristeva's critique of fixed identities and homogenizing tendencies within feminist discourse, Afzal-Khan's portrayal of Pakistani Muslim women is examined. The analysis highlights how Afzal-Khan's representations may serve personal or ideological purposes, rather than genuinely reflecting the diverse identities and choices of these women. This paper draws on Kristeva's ideas to question the authenticity and inclusivity of Afzal-Khan's feminist stance, critiquing her approach as a form of misrepresentation that undermines the complexity of Pakistani Muslim women's identities.

**Keywords:** representation, identity, monolithic term, feminism, woman.

### INTRODUCTION

"My place is now also a place where I manipulate my Muslim womanhood to make my way up the U.S. academic ladder, reporting to increased acclaim, the dire situation of Muslim women in Pakistan" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 19).

Afzal-Khan's honest acceptance of reporting the dire situation of Pakistani Muslim women entails that by representing those women, she garners the appreciation and favors of US academia. However, to term, the situation of Pakistani Muslim women as "dire" paints a bleak and horrible picture of Pakistani Muslim women, notwithstanding the diversity of their situation and heterogeneity of their experiences. Moreover, her honesty can't cover the fact that problematic

representation on part of the said women might put them in a position of disfavor with the international readers. According to Oliver, Kristeva's analysis of religious, literary, and philosophical texts "suggests that these texts have been historically situated social forces engaged in the production of representations, representations through which we live" (Oliver, 1993, p. 106).

This paper delineates Afzal-Khan's memoir as an unjust and problematic representation of Pakistani Muslim women. For this purpose, two elements of Julia Kristeva's work are taken into account. Firstly, her work on the representation of women by white middle-class feminism and her claim that this representation of women contributes towards

their oppression rather than their liberation from the oppressive structures. Secondly, Kristeva's work on identity politics with reference to the construction of the political identity of women will be drawn upon.

Afzal-Khan's portrayal of Pakistani Muslim women as living in dire circumstances is a reflection of the broader issues surrounding representation and identity politics, particularly in the context of postcolonial feminist discourse. This portrayal risks perpetuating a monolithic image of Muslim women, thereby overlooking the rich tapestry of socio-economic, cultural, and personal circumstances that define their lived experiences. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warns in her critique of representation, such singular narratives can act as a form of "epistemic violence" where the voices and perspectives of those being represented are marginalized or silenced. In this light, Afzal-Khan's memoir may inadvertently contribute to a discourse that reaffirms Western superiority by depicting Pakistani Muslim women as perpetual victims, needing to be spoken for, rather than as agents capable of articulating their own identities and resistances.

Moreover, the memoir's narrative aligns with the critiques of the Western feminist gaze that scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have raised. Mohanty argues that Western feminist scholarship often constructs "Third World women" as a homogenous group, facing uniformly oppressive conditions. This form of representation not only undermines the autonomy and agency of women in non-Western contexts but also simplifies the complex socio-political realities they navigate. Afzal-Khan's account, thus, could be seen as perpetuating the binary of the liberated Western woman versus the oppressed Muslim woman, a binary that fails to account for the nuances of cultural practices, religious identities, and the socio-political engagements of Pakistani women.

Kristeva's work on identity politics further illuminates the problematic nature of such representations. By focusing on how identity is constructed through language and cultural narratives, Kristeva underscores the importance of recognizing the multiplicity and fluidity of identities. Her perspective challenges the fixed, essentialist portrayals of Muslim women as

merely victims, instead advocating for a more dynamic understanding of identity that considers the intersecting influences of religion, class, and historical context. Utilizing Kristeva's insights allows for a critical examination of how Afzal-Khan's narrative, while seeking to highlight injustice, may inadvertently constrain the very subjects it aims to represent by framing their identities within rigid, pre-determined categories.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To critically analyze Fawzia Afzal-Khan's representation of Pakistani Muslim women in her memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style*, using Julia Kristeva's theory on feminism, identity, and representation.
2. To explore the implications of Afzal-Khan's critique of other women's choices and preferences within the context of feminist discourse.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the problematic representation and construction of identity of Pakistani women in *Lahore with Love* through a postcolonial lens, with a focus on Julia Kristeva's theoretical contributions. The methodology involves a close textual analysis of the novel, examining the portrayal of female characters and the intersection of their identities with postcolonial narratives. Kristeva's concept of abjection, particularly her ideas on the symbolic order and the construction of the feminine, will be employed to analyze how the novel constructs and represents Pakistani women's identities within the cultural and sociopolitical context of postcolonial Pakistan. The analysis will also consider the implications of these representations on broader discourses of gender and identity in postcolonial literature. By applying Kristeva's theories, the research aims to uncover the underlying power dynamics and cultural tensions that contribute to the problematic depiction of female characters. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and critical essays, will be used to support the textual analysis and provide a comprehensive understanding of the themes explored in the novel. This methodology will facilitate a nuanced exploration of the complexities surrounding the representation and

identity of Pakistani women in a postcolonial context.

### Literature Review

The topic of representation in the postcolonial perspective has been extensively explored by numerous writers and researchers. Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), was instrumental in establishing a framework for understanding how the West constructs and represents the "Orient" as the Other. This theoretical approach has since been employed across various disciplines to scrutinize the power dynamics inherent in representation. In line with this, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique against the universal category of "Woman" and her advocacy for considering "women" as real, material subjects of their collective histories highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of female identities within postcolonial contexts (Mohanty, 1988). This paper builds on Mohanty's stance by examining Fawzia Afzal-Khan's memoir, *Lahore with Love*, through the lens of Julia Kristeva's feminist theories, particularly her skepticism about feminism as a monolithic liberating movement.

Kristeva's work on identity politics and the representation of women is critical in understanding the complexities of feminist theory. Kristeva challenges essentialist notions of identity and urges a recognition of the fluidity and multiplicity of identities as "she wants a politics of individuals rather than of groups" (Oliver, 1993, p. 97). Her theories have garnered both support and criticism. Ann Rosalind Jones and Gayatri Spivak criticize Kristeva for what they perceive as an essentialist understanding of the female body, which could undermine feminist strategies aimed at deconstructing patriarchal structures (Jones, 1984; Spivak, 1981). Spivak, in particular, warns against the dangers of representation that claim to speak for the subaltern, suggesting that such acts can perpetuate epistemic violence by marginalizing the voices of those being represented.

Conversely, scholars like Kelly Oliver and Alice Jardine argue that Kristeva's work, when correctly interpreted, can offer significant insights into feminist discourse. Oliver (1993) interprets Kristeva's theories as advocating for the recognition of diverse subjectivities, which challenges the homogenization of women's

experiences. Oliver's reading suggests that Kristeva's critique of identity and language can be a powerful tool for destabilizing traditional representations that confine women to rigid categories, thus aligning with the argument presented in this paper.

The representation of Pakistani Muslim women in Afzal-Khan's *Lahore with Love* offers a relevant case study to examine these theoretical debates. According to Rahim and Hussain (2024), Afzal-Khan's memoir uses postmodern narrative techniques to explore gender issues but often resorts to representing Pakistani Muslim women in a way that aligns with Western notions of victimhood. They argue that while Afzal-Khan aims to critique patriarchal oppression, her portrayal risks reinforcing stereotypes that depict Muslim women as oppressed and powerless. This form of representation, as Rahim and Hussain suggest, caters to Western academic and media audiences, thereby compromising the authenticity of the lived experiences of Pakistani women.

Similarly, Raza and Zubair's analysis of *Lahore with Love* emphasizes the construction of alternative female identities through the depiction of female friendship and solidarity (Raza & Zubair, 2020). However, they caution that Afzal-Khan's narrative sometimes relies on a binary opposition between the progressive West and the oppressive East. This binary not only simplifies the complex realities of Pakistani women's lives but also risks perpetuating a neo-Orientalist discourse, where the West is seen as the site of liberation and the East as the site of oppression. By framing Pakistani Muslim women's identities within this dichotomy, the memoir limits the potential for a more nuanced and multifaceted representation of their experiences.

Through these critiques and theoretical perspectives, this paper argues that Afzal-Khan's memoir exemplifies the challenges of representing women from postcolonial societies in ways that avoid essentialism and homogenization. Drawing on Kristeva's insights into the constructed nature of identity and the importance of recognizing diversity within the category of 'women,' this paper critiques the memoir for its problematic representation of Pakistani Muslim women. By engaging with the debates outlined by Mohanty, Kristeva, and contemporary scholars, this study highlights the

need for feminist discourses that acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity of women's experiences, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

### Discussion and Analysis

According to Oliver, 'Kristeva wants nothing to do with feminism or "woman." She argues that, among other things, feminism has become a religion and a power-seeking ideology' (Oliver, 1993b, p. 165). Moreover, in the name of feminism, many feminists impose another repressive power structure in place of the patriarchal one. This can be found in Afzal-Khan's memoir under discussion. Afzal-Khan has courageously recounted the situation of Pakistan and Pakistani women before and after the Zia regime. Her representation of her 'girlfriends' is debatable. Afzal-Khan presents herself as the most enlightened and "Cassandra-like" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 12), while others as weak, backward, and easily beguiled.

For instance, in Hajra's case, when Hajra meets Sufi, she *chooses* to become a communist, "He is a communist, that means he is totally against all this extravagant western capitalist lifestyle we've all adopted" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 43). Afzal-Khan recounts this instance with a condescending tone, "This latest pronouncement leaves me feeling totally bewildered, is this Hajra, the Hajra I've known..." (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 43). She goes on to explain that She was also against class repression and she also wanted to change the system "but not with this hateful rhetoric" (44). In addition to that, she narrates in a mocking tone Hajra's "newly acquired love of the Urdu language" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 43).

Ironically, this is not any different from Afzal-Khan's penchant for westernized sensibilities. Why is it ok for Afzal-Khan to identify with the western ideals while it is not for Hajra to identify with the communist ideals and national sensibilities? Just because Hajra was not like that for the nine years since Afzal-Khan knew her, does that mean that she will remain the same throughout her life because that is how Afzal-Khan would want to see her? This intolerance for a different point of view is at the heart of the fundamentalist mentality that Afzal-Khan appears to be opposing. According to Kristeva, "The speaking being is a subject in process because her identity is never fixed in place..." (McAfee, 2003,

p. 105), and this is against the traditional, unified, and essential notions of identity. In addition to that, the traditional notions of identity contribute to the power relations. It is by unifying the identity that one can take control over the other. So, Afzal-Khan's scorn for her friend Hajra's different choices is engendered due to the fact that she is losing control over her. However, it should be noted that Afzal-Khan is not to be blamed for consciously trying to overpower Hajra. Nonetheless, her stance can be analyzed from a Foucauldian perspective of holding on to identity to exercise power.

Moreover, Afzal-Khan has conveniently juxtaposed Hajra's choice, Afzal-Khan's warnings, and Hajra's fate to imply that Afzal-Khan's prophecy was right and Hajra going against it caused her unfortunate death. Yes, Hajra's choice did cause her unfortunate death but regardless of the consequences, Hajra made a choice in accordance with her right to make one, "I've made my choice, and it is here, in this life, with Sufi and my painting. I hope you can understand and be happy for me" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 51).

Similarly, when she visits her friends Naumana and Saira in 2001, there is an air of tension between her and them. They have chosen to identify with the Pakistani sensibilities. Moreover, their religious views have developed in a different way than Afzal-Khan's and Afzal-Khan is not happy about it. This meeting revolves around discussions on religion and lifestyles with sarcastic undertones. Naumana and Saira are disturbed by Afzal-Khan's offensive behavior and they continuously defend their choices. Afzal-Khan is not satisfied with the justifications and retorts, "Honestly, girls, how can you have become so influenced by this religious claptrap being forced down everyone's throats by the wretched dictator and his mullah henchmen?" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 67). Isn't this a *hateful rhetoric* that she was condemning in the case of Haji's views? Moreover, when she says "What can these men have to teach us women about our desires, our rights, about what we can or cannot do?" doesn't she sound ironic? Because there seems to be no difference between her and the "men" she is so angry about. Afzal-Khan's aggressive and intolerant behavior towards her friends shows that just like the patriarchal

repressive structure, Afzal-Khan also wants to impose her choices on her friends.

Her condescending tone of superiority due to her lifestyle in contrast to her girlfriends' lifestyle is quite problematic if Afzal-Khan claims to be a postcolonial feminist who represents Pakistani Muslim women. She perceives that "You managed to escape, Madame, and it shows..." (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 66) is written on her friends' "desiring happysad faces" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 66). This representation of her "girlfriends" quite conveniently affirms white feminists' monolithic perception of the "third world women" that Mohanty tries to deconstruct in *Under Western Eyes*.

In this article, Mohanty criticizes the representation of women of color by white feminist scholarship. According to Mohanty, these feminists claim to voice the issues of women from all over the world but in doing so, they ignore the heterogeneity of individual women's experiences. Moreover, these feminists' "construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently all women are expected to organize" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 62), undermines or ignores many other pressing issues that affect the daily lives of women from the third world—and every individual woman from all over the world. Also, according to Mohanty, "feminist scholarly practices (whether reading, writing, critical, or textual) are inscribed in relations of power—relations which they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 62). In addition to that, the question of universalism will remain unanswered if people are perceived according to one's own biasness towards a certain culture (Lionnet 3)

Mohanty's argument shows that when a writer decides to represent an individual or a group of people, they should be aware of the consequences of that representation on the "represented" entity's life and reputation. As a postcolonial writer, the very image of the third-world woman—as a weak, subjugated, always victimized, and needs to be saved—that Mohanty strives to deconstruct, Afzal-Khan affirms.

In addition to that, according to Oliver, Kristeva also rejects this monolithic idea of "woman", 'she criticizes feminist movements which maintain some fixed notion of a feminine essence or

"woman" because they cover over differences between individual women' (*Revolution* 98).

Afzal-Khan, in her memoir, also seems to be holding a fixed notion of a *liberal woman* against a *conservative woman*. In the introduction, while narrating her interview with Benazir Bhutto, she disparages Bhutto's choice of taking the headscarf after becoming the Prime Minister. She seems to be implying Bhutto's hypocrisy because of her dressing while Bhutto was in Oxford and Harvard in comparison to in Pakistan. Why is it important to Afzal-Khan that a *liberal woman* must dress in western attire? Also, if Bhutto appropriates Pakistani culture for political gains, as Afzal-Khan accuses her of, doesn't Afzal-Khan also exploit her Muslim womanhood for academic gains?

Furthermore, throughout the memoir, Afzal-Khan is contradicting her approach. On the one hand, her disdain for the demands put on women in a repressive patriarchal structure is quite obvious; on the other hand, she mirrors the repressive structure's function of putting women in specific roles. For instance, during her meeting with her friends Saira and Naumana, Afzal-Khan's views about Naumana's body are quite degrading and echo the *male gaze* in a patriarchal society: "The breasts that had so held me in awe on the verge of adolescence have turned into overripe watermelons, jiggling uncomfortably at every move she makes" (64). The female body or choices are still not liberated from the expectations.

Another example of the contradiction in her approach is evident from her account of her mother's character. In the introduction, she writes a letter to her mother in which she reveals that she was aware of her mother's cheating on her father (xv). It is difficult to understand her reason for *exposing* her mother's choices because later on, she also cheats her husband with Bakri (132). In fact, her relationship with Bakri was inappropriate on another level too. He was her most admirable *girlfriend's* ex-husband. In addition to that, Afzal-Khan shamelessly narrates his version of whatever happened between him and Madina's marriage. Why does she believe the narrative of a man as the final version of whatever happened? Why is there no account of Madina's version of the story? And what kind of admiration is this that Afzal-Khan ends up defaming Madina and then

has the audacity to deem herself as Madina's friend—or rather *girlfriend*?

Another contradictory instance is her depiction of the right-wing religious woman, Umme Hassan, at the end of her memoir (almost like a conscious effort to appear tolerant towards the women from opposing ideology) as a 'stauncher women's libber, free of the yoke of husband and family, than any "westernized" Pakistani woman' (159). Later, in an interview regarding this memoir, when Afzal-Khan was asked regarding the conservative feminist movements in Muslim societies, including Pakistan, Fawzia says, "... not all women's movements are feminist movements. The conservative religious movements such as those spearheaded by women of the religious right, as, for example, in the context of Pakistan, the women of the Jamaat-i-Islami — I do not consider as feminist." This is a great example of exclusion that Kristeva observes about feminism. Also, her assumption that a *liberated woman* is the one who is free from *the yoke of husband and family* shows her identification with the white middle-class feminists' notions of liberty. And, this is the point of departure for Kristeva from these feminists who make demands on the women from different parts of the world to identify with their definition of a feminist as "some women of color argue that in order to join the feminist movement, they have to assimilate and deny their particularity" (Oliver, 1993a, p. 98). For Kristeva, it is a woman's choice to marry and have kids as "It is not maternity or reproduction that is responsible for women's oppression, but the representations of them" (Oliver, 1993a, p. 105). Now, the idea of representation will be linked to the idea of the identity of women as it has been explicated by Kristeva and Scott. Against feminism, Kristeva argues that the strategies of feminists are problematic because these strategies end up constructing a political identity of women by excluding their differences and individualities. Moreover, "When represented, the unrepresentable woman becomes what she is not" and "It seems necessary for feminists to represent women in order to work for the emancipation of women from the oppressive representations of them in patriarchal cultures. But for Kristeva this is to once again... render her powerless..." (Oliver, 1993b, p.108). In simple words, feminism (unconsciously) replaces the repressive

treatment of women in a patriarchal structure with another repressive structure that eventually makes the women powerless. So, the status of the women remains the same i.e. powerless, victimized, and in need of a savior. Although Kristeva agrees that this group identification of women as "we women" (Oliver, 1993a, p.98) had made it possible to achieve some goals but, with regards to excluding and undermining the heterogeneities of individual women, this is quite a problematic practice.

Similarly, Scott observes that "the identity of women was not so much a self-evident fact of history as it was evidence of someone's, some group's effort to identify and thereby mobilize a collectivity" (Scott, 2001, p. 287). This need to render a historical identity to Muslim Pakistani women can be observed in Afzal-Afzal-Khan's memoir. The protagonist seems to be in a position of power, representing her "girlfriends", apparently as an act of sympathy. But the question is, for whom is she representing them? The answer lies in her confessional quote already stated at the beginning of this paper.

There are some of the key elements in this memoir that hint at the fact that Afzal-Khan appropriates her Muslim womanhood and her girlfriends' personal anecdotes to garner the appreciation of her western readership. First of all, the subtitle of the memoir "Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style" begs the question of her authentic representation. The play on the word "girlfriends" evokes the homoerotic relationships among the characters of her memoir. The title definitely invites the foreign reader to read the account of tabooed social topics in a *conservative* and *backward* Muslim society.

Secondly, the introduction includes the account of Benazir Bhutto in a stereotypical perspective i.e. the need to conform to the patriarchal standards to become the head of the state in a Muslim country. Also, the confessional tone of Afzal-Khan in this introduction and her claim of writing "shared herstories" (Afzal-Khan, 2010, p. 18) misguide the reader into believing that the story is going to be about personal and socially unacceptable topics.

Finally, employing the vivid and *vulgar* descriptions of female bodies (as already mentioned above in her meeting with Saira and Naumana) on the writer's part and later

showing her friends' (Saira and Naumana) discomfort while joining the protagonist in this body talk definitely depicts the stereotypical image of Pakistani women who have been oppressed by their religion.

Thus, by constructing the historical identity of Pakistani Muslim women, Afzal-Khan furthers her professional and academic motives but, at the expense of misrepresenting her *girlfriends*. The evidence of her misrepresentation can be found in the legal lawsuit against the publisher of this book by one of her *girlfriends*.

### Conclusion

So, Afzal-Khan's memoir definitely proves to be a successful project as far as the recognition and progress of the writer's academic and professional ventures are concerned. However, it fails as a postcolonial voice representing the Pakistani Muslim Women's situation in the past, present, or future. It undermines the personal and individual voices of the women concerned. In addition to that, it does not take into account the choices made by the individual women and it is silent about the circumstances that led them towards those choices. It is a self-contradictory and narrow representation of the historical and personal accounts of the Pakistani Muslim women solely based on the Afzal-Khan's memory and her preoccupation with the construction of their identity in pursuit of her personal motives. Moreover, it reiterates Kristeva's reservations regarding feminism operating on the "politics of exclusion and counterpower" (Oliver, 1993a, p. 98). Finally, it is not devoid of any responsibility on the part of the women it claims to represent because "feminist scholarship, like most other kinds of scholarship, is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses. So, representation plays an important role in the material reality of the represented. And, it is the responsibility of the writer who claims to represent a person or a group of people to ensure that they are accounting for their cultural, social, ethnic, and personal differences as, according to Kristeva, representation of *woman* can be altered "through the power of texts" (Oliver, 1993a, p. 106).

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