

## PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM AND WOMEN'S EXPLOITATION IN SHAHRAZ'S THE HOLY WOMAN: A FEMINIST STANCE

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### ABSTRACT

We live in a patriarchal society where males dominate all spheres of life, subjecting women to marginalization, exploitation, suppression, and otherization. This research paper is an attempt to investigate patriarchal system and women's exploitation as portrayed in Shahraz's The Holy Woman, using feminism as theoretical lens. The Holy Woman is a literary masterpiece on feminism, focusing on feminist concerns. Qaisara Shahraz is a distinguished Pakistani writer who, through her female protagonist, Zarri Bano, highlights how patriarchal system uses women as puppet in its hands, treating them as second class citizens—inferior, othered, and subaltern. She examines the ways in which women's agency, identities, and bodies are objectified and dominated by the patriarchal system. A close reading of the novel manifests that patriarchal societal system leads to women's exploitation, suppression and marginalization. The patriarchal system marginalizes and silences women, asserting male dominance and legitimizing itself by manipulating religious practices to align with its own norms. Furthermore, this research paper will be a valuable addition to the already existing literature in the domain of feminism.

**Key Terms:** Patriarchy, Exploitation, Females, Exploitation, Suppression, The Holy Woman

### INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is a system of interconnected societal practices where men hold power to control and exploit women, where men occupy dominant roles while women are relegated to subordinate positions (Walby, 1990). Patriarchy is a societal system, laying stress on the supremacy of males over females. It wreaks havoc on the lives of women, rendering them silenced, voiceless, and muted. It results in their suppression, oppression, and cruelty, as well as their exploitation socially, politically, emotionally, sexually, and physically. It hinders women's emancipation across various dimensions—socially, politically, and educationally. The society we live in is a patriarchal, where women face subjugation, oppression, and suppression of even their basic rights. They are treated as commodities or mere reproductive machines. Women are regarded as second-class citizens, objects, and puppets to be controlled, and are consistently marginalized as subalterns. Numerous restrictions and bans are

imposed on them. Patriarchy employs various techniques to control and suppress women, notably by equating "honour and dignity with a woman's body and trusting chastity as the ultimate good" (Mumtaz & Kaurp, 2022, 12).

Qaisra Shahraz occupies a unique place among contemporary Pakistani authors, with her work predominantly addressing societal rather than political issues. Born in Pakistan, she now resides and works in England, where she has established herself as a notable educationist and an accomplished writer across various genres. Her literary trajectory is deeply rooted in social concerns, particularly focusing on the trials faced by women in Pakistan. Her fiction explores themes such as enforced marriage, celibacy, marital violence, divorce, female sexuality, hijab, inheritance, and childbearing. Central to her narratives is the exploration of women's lives as they navigate the rigid patriarchal system deeply rooted in local customs and traditions, often with

severe, sometimes fatal repercussions. Shahraz (2001) addresses feminist concerns, while also critiquing the hegemonic patriarchal systems that suppress women's identities in her well recognized novel, *The Holy Woman*. She portrays the intricate emotions, dilemmas, and relentless efforts of women as they navigate oppression, including patriarchal subjugation, marginalization and sexual exploitation. Mumtaz and Kaur (2022) contend that Shahraz presents examples of how Pakistani women have been systematically constrained and controlled by patriarchal norms and cultural practices for centuries, often justified through religious, traditional, and state mechanisms. In Pakistan, patriarchal doctrines have significantly shaped the social positioning of men and women, with traditions, ideologies, and cultural norms delineating masculine and feminine identities as 'self' and 'other' (p. 14).

Shahraz (2001) illustrates in *The Holy Woman* how Pakistan women have long been troubled and restricted by patriarchal systems, often justified under the guise of state authority, religion and heritage. The patriarchal system has shaped the societal status of both men and women, as patriarchal ideologies and cultural values foster belief systems that influence the formation of masculine and feminine identities, framing men as the 'self' and women as the 'other.' The notion of 'honour' is tied to a woman's identity, compelling her to uphold it at the cost of her own happiness. Shahraz (2001) emphasizes that socio-religious practices are leveraged and perpetuated to serve patriarchal interests, rather than being inherently endorsed by religion. Zarri Bano exemplifies not only her father's dominion but also the opposition she faces as a woman, navigating the authoritarian network created by patriarchal systems masked as religious doctrine. Through the central character of the novel, Zarri Bano, the novelist vividly illustrates the challenges faced by women, emphasizing themes such as suppression, sexuality, dominance, and patriarchy. The usage of term 'izzat' is used as a tool to subjugate women, and prevent them from questioning the unjust power relations in their households within patriarchal system. Habib Khan is one of the main patriarchal characters of the novel. After the death of his only son, Habib Khan wants his daughter, Zarri Bano to marry the Holy Quran. He wants her to become a 'Holy Woman' of his clan so that she

will not be able to marry and inherit his possessions. Zarri Bano wants to start her own publishing firm and get married to Sikander but her personal goals are suppressed by Habib Khan. The patriarchal attitude of Habib Khan can be seen when he takes the decision for the family without paying attention to Zarri Bano's independence. He tells his wife that he disapproves Sikander because of the latter's bad behavior to Zarri Bano even though the wife tries to support her daughter's marriage. Habib Khan's authoritarian stance becomes even more apparent when he decides to seek his father's counsel, Siraj Din, regarding the possibility of making Zarri Bano the *Shahzadi Ibadat*, or Holy Woman. When Zarri Bano protests and asserts her desire to marry Sikander, Habib Khan resolutely refuses her request and declares that no marriage ceremony will take place. This rigid stance highlights his traditional, gender-biased perspective under the patriarchal societal system.

This research paper aims to examine the representations of patriarchal system and women's exploitation as portrayed in Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* using feminism as the theoretical lens. A close reading of the selected text reveals that the novel is replete with issues such as patriarchal system and women's exploitation. Habib Khan, Zarri Bano's father represents a patriarchal system and Zarri Bano embodies the victim of patriarchal system's exploitation.

#### Research Questions:

1. How does Shahraz portray patriarchal system and women's exploitation in her novel, *The Holy Woman*?
2. In what way does this research paper criticize patriarchal system as a root cause of women's exploitation?

#### Research Objectives:

1. To assess Shahraz's portrayal of patriarchal system and women's exploitation in her novel, *The Holy Woman*.
2. To analyze how this research paper criticizes patriarchal system as a root cause of women's exploitation.

### Literature Review

One of the longstanding cultural systems, which has persisted across centuries, is that of patriarchy. This system, whether acknowledged or not, has consistently resurfaced in various societies over time. Patriarchy refers to a framework of systems, social structures, and practices that establish male dominance over women (Walby, 1990). Patriarchy denotes the dominance of men at both public and private levels, a concept frequently employed by feminists to elucidate the power dynamics between males and females (Sultana, 2012). Patriarchy is linked to the dynamics of male dominance and female subordination. It is perpetuated within the family structure, where fathers and husbands are seen as the primary authority figures, wielding complete power (Fauzia & Rahayu, 2019). Thus, patriarchal hegemony can be understood as the ideological authority asserting that males are innately superior to females, perpetuating a belief that females can never attain equality with males. The society we live in is a patriarchal, where women are subjected to subjugation, oppression, and suppression of even their basic rights, often being treated as commodities or mere reproductive machines. Patriarchy is antagonistic to matriarchal system and plays a key role in perpetuating oppression, cruelty, and suppression of women's basic rights. "The word 'patriarchy' is likely to figure frequently—as a catch-all word to describe the diverse ills that women suffer from" (Geetha, 2007, p. 4). Patriarchal system puts bans and restrictions on women in every sphere of life. "In a patriarchal society women have to struggle to be educated, to have property made over to them and to choose their partners in marriage" (Geetha, 2007, p. 5). Patriarchal dominance has been a recurring and significant theme throughout the history of English literature. Many literary works have both reflected and critiqued the societal norms and power structures that have historically privileged men over women. Feminist literature and criticism have been instrumental in analyzing and challenging these patriarchal themes within English literature. This theme of patriarchal dominance, which highlights the historical and societal power imbalances favoring men, has been explored across various periods and cultures within English-speaking societies. From early literary texts to contemporary works, the exploration of

patriarchal dominance remains a complex and enduring subject of literary investigation.

Mahajan (2016) posits that the female characters in *Ice Candy-Man* highlight the mistreatment of women and the societal pressures exerted to compel them into predefined gender roles. These characters also reveal the patriarchal prejudices inherent in traditional societal attitudes. Within patriarchal system that systematically discriminates against women and conditions them for perpetual subordination, women characters in the novel exhibit an awareness of their desires and a determined assertion of their independence. The novel poignantly illustrates the plight of women who are often forced to mold their lives according to male desires, effectively living in a state of subjugation. Nonetheless, through certain female characters, Sidhwa portrays that some women are resolute in their pursuit of independence and are prepared to struggle for their own identities. Bhat and Riyaz (2022) remark:

Bapsi Sidwa is a female writer who has tried to highlight the predicaments and problems faced by women, particularly Asian women. Most of her writings attempt to dissect the patriarchal and oppressive structures that come in the way of women and thus push them on the backfoot. Bapsi sidwa has depicted women from Punjabi, Parsi, American, and Indian families in her writing. (p. 297)

Goyal (2020) points out that patriarchy fundamentally shapes the hardships of the protagonist in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*. This system undermines personal relationships and personal autonomy, as demonstrated by the protagonist's marriage, which deteriorates from an ostensibly egalitarian bond to one marked by control and abuse. Patriarchal values influence the protagonist's parents, who prioritize social reputation over their daughter's well-being, reinforcing the patriarchal system. Finally, the protagonist's story demonstrates the general feminist analysis of patriarchy, which corresponds to the stages of imitation, rebellion, and realization in feminism in literature. According to Fitriani and Sulasih (2022), the main character in, *Girl of the Southern Sea*, suffers from injustice that stems from the society's patriarchal nature. The culture of patriarchy results in the discrimination that is experienced by the female protagonist, Nia. The novel illustrates several types

of oppression against the female character Nisa: oppression of women, exclusion of women and negative portrayal of women.

Yaqoob (2018) argues that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Typhoon* critique anti-socio-cultural systems that are supported by male domination and religious interpretations which make women as victims in Pakistani and Afghan societies. These works reveal the crimes and the injustice that is committed in the name of religion and culture against the female population. They illustrate how the notion of 'the sacred' is employed as a patriarchal mechanism to justify male dominance and control, thereby denying women their fundamental human rights and relegating them to subordinate positions. The novels highlight how injustices, cruelty, and oppression against women are rationalized and perpetuated through everyday practices justified by cultural and religious sanctity. As confessional narratives, they document the physical, emotional, sexual, psychological violence inflicted upon women, while also articulating opposition against the oppressive patriarchal society.

Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* also deals with themes of patriarchal dominance and women's exploitation. Therefore, this research paper aims to analyze the representation of these themes through a feminist theoretical perspective.

### **Research Methodology**

This research paper employs a qualitative research design to examine the depiction of the patriarchal system and women's exploitation in Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*. Grounded in feminist literary theory of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet, it focuses on key concepts such as patriarchy, and women's exploitation. A detailed reading of *The Holy Woman* will be conducted to identify and analyze instances of patriarchal control and women's exploitation. Special attention will be given to the representation of female characters and their interactions with the patriarchal system.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Male dominance refers to the feeling acknowledged by the emotions of both men and women that the woman's will is somehow subordinate to the male's and that general authority in dyadic and familial relationships, in whatever terms a particular society defines authority,

ultimately resides in the male. (Goldberg, 1973, p. 33)

Patriarchy is a political and social system which endorses male domination over females in political, social and economic issues. "Patriarchy refers only to suprafamilial levels of organization; authority in familial and dyadic relationships is described by the term male dominance" (Goldberg, 1973, p. 32). Patriarchy is a pervasive and universal social system. Across different societies, despite the variety of political, religious, economic, and societal structures, there has been no instance where authority and leadership have not been predominantly linked with men. "Patriarchy is any system of organization (political, economic, religious, or social) that associates authority and leadership primarily with males and in which males fill the vast majority of authority and leadership positions" (Goldberg, 1973, p. 30).

Feminism challenges the male-dominated framework that shapes women's experiences, opposing the systematic exclusion of women from political, economic, educational, and social opportunities. It simultaneously advocates for the attainment of equal rights for women across all areas of life. Feminism arose as a response to counter the pervasive efforts of male dominance. Broadly speaking, it represents a movement aimed at resisting the marginalization, subordination, and denigration imposed by dominant cultural forces across political, economic, and social spheres (Regina & Setyowati, 2020). Feminism is a societal movement that seeks to empower females by advocating for equal rights and opportunities alongside males. "Feminism tries to dismantle the long-established patriarchal system that subordinates and suppresses women" (Zubair et al., 2020, p.600). Hannam (2007) defines feminism as the acknowledgment of power imbalances between men and women, where females are positioned in an inferior role relative to males. From this viewpoint, feminism can be understood as a challenge to the traditional gender hierarchy, where women's roles and status are viewed as inferior to men's. The movement, therefore, aims to transform women's conditions through the pursuit of independence and autonomy.

The main task of feminist literary critics seems to stand guard against the curbing patriarchal norms which have been inherited perpetually. Thus

marginalizations of women, their predicament, struggle for identity, finding their own space, celebrating the female body are the chief subjects of this trend. (Srinivas, 2022, p. 336)

Feminist theory focuses on the marginalization of women, who are relegated to a secondary status within a patriarchal culture. This theory examines the subjugation of women under a social system designed by men to dominate them. In such a system, women are rendered powerless, while men assume positions of superiority and control (Guerin, 1999). Feminists challenge the assumptions that assign women a secondary status relative to men and the reductive view that confines women's roles to that of homemaker, mother, and a passive presence. This perspective starkly contrasts with the stereotypes associated with masculinity, such as strength, wanderlust, and aggression. Mahajan (2016) points out that today, feminism holds a significant position in contemporary literature. It represents a modern social, political, financial, and cultural movement that addresses "the exploitation of women by the patriarchal system of society" (p. 738). In a patriarchal society, Beauvoir (1949) observes, women are regarded as the "other," positioned as a minority whose power is subordinated to that of men. Beauvoir (1949) asserts that men are considered "the self," while women are relegated to the position of "the other." This distinction underscores the patriarchal system's tendency to deem women as "inferior" and men as "superior." As Beauvoir (1949) explains, patriarchy establishes a hierarchical distinction between men and women, positioning women at the lowest rung of society. This pervasive gender inequality and discrimination have fueled the feminist movement, which strives to address these imbalances and advocate for equal rights for women across all spheres of life.

According to Millet (1970), the notion of masculinity and the subordination of femininity are manifested through the allocation of character traits, roles, and statuses between the sexes. In this division, women are often portrayed as passive, unintelligent, obedient, kind, and ineffectual, while men are depicted as aggressive, intelligent, strong, and capable. In a patriarchal society, the roles attributed to men emphasize strength, respect, and significance, whereas women are relegated to domestic duties, typically involving the private

sphere, sexuality, and childcare (Millet, 1970). Women are relegated to a secondary status and they experience marginalization across all areas of their lives (Millet, 1970). Religion has often been utilized as a means of manipulation to reinforce male dominance, with the prevailing notion that patriarchy is supported by divine authority across various aspects of life (Millet, 1970). Male dominance operates within three key domains: the family, society, and the state (Millet, 1970). Millet notes that men's positions of power are robust across all areas of life, and this dominance exerts a significant influence on other family members (Millet, 1970). Millet distinguishes between sex and gender by defining sex as biologically determined, referring to male and female, while gender, characterized as masculine and feminine, is understood to be more psychological and culturally constructed in nature (Millet, 1970). Millet (1970) challenges the patriarchal system by asserting that sexual domination is not merely an omnipresent ideology but the core foundation of societal power structures. Within the framework of patriarchal sexual politics, men are elevated as sovereign subjects, whereas women are confined to achieving fulfillment through subservient and subordinate roles. This entrenched male bias permeates cultural norms to such an extent that women are frequently deprived of the ability to perceive themselves as autonomous individuals from their own perspectives. Millet (1970) argues that patriarchy—a social system in which men hold power and privilege over women—is fundamentally rooted in sexual politics. She argues that the qualities like masculinity and femininity are socially learned and that the gender dichotomy has been used to justify male power over women. Millet (1970) posits that patriarchy is maintained through sexual oppression of women, which encompass sexual objectification and subjugation of women's bodies, gendered violence and control over women's reproductive functions. She, further, stresses that patriarchy is not just constructed through cultural channels like literature, art, media but also through formal institutions like the family, religious institutions and the state.

In sum, both Beauvoir and Millet denounce the patriarchal system that sets man and woman in two different categories where man is a sovereign subject and woman is the lowest form of life.

Within this patriarchal societal system, women are permitted only to find fulfillment in subservience, and are denied the opportunity to recognize themselves as subjects in their own right. They are relegated to a secondary status and they experience marginalization across all areas of their lives. An in-depth study of Shahrzad's novel, *The Holy Woman* manifests that the patriarchal system elevates men as sovereign subjects while positioning women at the lowest rung of society, as expounded by Beauvoir and Millet.

### Textual Analysis

The term ['patriarchy'] implies 'male domination', 'male prejudice (against women)' or simply 'male power. When a man raises his voice in the course of an argument and insists on his point of view, without letting others who are party to that conversation, especially women, get a word in, his actions are likely to be described as 'aggressively patriarchal'. (Geetha, 2007, pp. 4-5)

In patriarchal society set-up, women find themselves relegated to subordinate roles, with their femininity and individual identities constrained by rigid, traditional norms. Marriages, governed by these static patriarchal rules and laws, frequently function as virtual prisons, severely limiting women's freedom and autonomy. Patriarchy gives rise to social hierarchies based on gender, positioning men as the dominant, or "first class," while relegating women to a "second class" status, consistently subordinate to men. In *The Holy Woman*, Shahrzad (2001) explores the ways in which females in Pakistan have been historically oppressed by patriarchal systems, often under the pretext of state authority, religious doctrine, and cultural heritage. These patriarchal structures have profoundly influenced the societal roles and perceptions of both men and women, with patriarchal ideologies shaping the conceptualization of masculine and feminine identities. This framework positions men as the normative 'self' and women as the 'other.' The concept of 'honour' becomes intimately connected with a woman's identity, compelling her to sacrifice personal happiness to preserve it. Shahrzad (2001) argues that socio-religious practices are manipulated to uphold patriarchal agenda, rather than being fundamentally supported by religious teachings. She deals with emotional distress, dejection, insecurity, and fear hovering over the

existence of females under patriarchal system in her novel. She challenges the patriarchal discourse surrounding the female existence, suppressing their even basic rights. Zarri Bano, the female protagonist, represents a vivid depiction of an exploited woman in the novel. For instance, within the traditional framework of marriage, Shahrzad (2001) highlights concepts such as 'izzat' and 'ghairat.' While these terms may appear neutral, they play a significant role in reinforcing female othering as perpetuated by patriarchal societal system. Furthermore, these expressions are contextually significant as they provoke the patriarchal ego, thus contributing to the maintenance of gender-based hierarchies.

Shahrzad (2001) addresses feminist concerns, while also critiquing the dominant patriarchal systems that suppress women's identities in her well recognized novel, *The Holy Woman*. The story of the novel starts with the appearance of a prospective groom for Zarri Bano, a young woman with a university education. This development is notably unconventional within the context of Pakistani society, particularly considering that Sikander, the prospective groom, is a businessman. The fact that Zarri Bano, at twenty-seven years old, remains unmarried is equally striking, as it challenges traditional expectations for women of her age. Additionally, her rebellious nature is underscored by her attendance at a village festival—an event predominantly attended by men and typically not considered appropriate for young women "to join openly in all male- activities" (Shahrzad, 2001, p. 12). Zarri Bano's character consistently defies societal norms and conventions, as exemplified by her indifference to the public display of her uncovered head, a behavior that prompts a mild reprimand from Jaffar, her brother: "Look at your dirty hair! It's everywhere! It is not good for a woman to be seen like this... It creates a bad impression. Not only to of you, but of us and our father" (Shahrzad, 2001, p.13). The reprimand by her brother, Jaffar directed at Zarri Bano emphasizes the importance of maintaining a modest appearance as a means of upholding familial and societal honor under patriarchal system. The concern expressed about Zarri Bano's uncovered hair and the implication that her appearance could negatively impact the reputation of her family highlight how women are held responsible for conforming to strict social norms

under patriarchal system. This reinforces the notion that women's behavior and presentation are scrutinized and regulated to protect family honor within patriarchal systems.

The story of novel is set in Sindh, Pakistan, where Zarri Bano, a fortunate and beautiful young woman, is raised in a wealthy Muslim family. Surrounded by luxury and privilege, she is also highly educated. Zarri Bano attracts the attention of Sikander Din, a man from Karachi, and soon experiences her first love. Their engagement is officially celebrated, but the story's central conflict emerges when her younger brother, Jaffar, tragically dies in an accident, triggering a series of events rooted in ancestral customs. Habib Khan, a landlord, is Zarri Bano's father who epitomizes the traditional gender bias rooted in patriarchal societies. Following the death of his only son, he decides to impose a harsh and irrevocable fate on his daughter, Zarri Bano, under the guise of religious duty. Habib Khan condemns her to a life of celibacy by forcing her into a symbolic marriage with the Holy Quran. This act is a manifestation of his patriarchal mindset. He asserts his authority as the head of the family, declaring that only he knows what is best for Zarri Bano. He disregards his wife's advice and Zarri Bano's own desires, particularly her desire to marry Sikander, whom he disapproves of. Habib Khan's decision to designate Zarri Bano as a *Shahzadi Ibadat*, is deeply rooted in his patriarchal beliefs. When Zarri Bano resists this imposition, expressing her desire to marry Sikander, Habib Khan violently rejects her wishes, asserting that no marriage will take place as long as he is alive. He states that he will not "hand it [inheritance] over to some stranger who just happens to marry my daughter" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 47). As the head of the family, Habib Khan designates Zarri Bano as the Holy Woman, or *Shahzadi Ibadat*, making her the family's chosen heir. The role of this heir is steeped in patriarchal tradition, requiring her to remain within the confines of the family home through symbolic marriage with the Holy Quran. The creation of the Holy Woman status by Zarri Bano's ancestors is a strategic measure to ensure that the family's land and property will remain under their control. Despite her earlier independence, she ultimately accepts the status of a Holy Woman, as dictated by the patriarchal societal system.

*The Holy Woman* presents a stark dichotomy between the self as the 'oppressor' and the other as the 'oppressed.' The character of Zarri Bano exemplifies the 'oppressed' as she yields to her father's wish for her to become a 'Holy Woman' through the ritual of *Shahzadi Ibadat*, intended to safeguard the family's land after her brother's untimely death. In this process, Zarri Bano suppresses her liberal feminist identity and assumes the socially constructed role dictated by patriarchal authority. As a result, she becomes a victim of the inhumane practices and patriarchal culture that ultimately serve to benefit men (Mumtaz & Kaur, 2022). Siraj Din, Habib Khan's father is the head of the family; all significant decisions, including those affecting Zarri Bano's future, are made with his approval. This is demonstrated when Habib Khan approaches him, saying, "Father, I need to talk to you. It's about Zarri Bano and our inheritance" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 69). Habib Khan's decision is made in consultation with Siraj Din, as Pakistani feudal families traditionally seek to preserve their estates through male heirs. In the absence of a male heir, Islamic law stipulates that the estate would, otherwise, be transferred to women upon marriage, as women are granted property rights under Islamic jurisprudence. The conversation between Siraj Din and Habib Khan highlights the supremacy of the patriarchal system over women, highlighting Siraj Din's decisive role and the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure within the family. It reveals how women's voices are marginalized, their exploitation is normalized, and their objectification is perpetuated. Khalil (2017) maintains that the central theme of *The Holy Woman* revolves around the long-standing tradition of marrying off the eldest daughter to the Holy Quran, a practice that enables feudal lords to preserve their lands and wealth in the absence of a male heir. Through the character of Zarri Bano, Shahraz (2001) exposes the dark and oppressive facets of the feudal and patriarchal systems embedded in society. Zarri Bano plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Pressured by her father to become a 'Holy Woman' to safeguard the family's land and honor, Zarri Bano sacrifices her personal aspirations, including her lover and her freedom.

Shahraz (2001), the novelist, portrays the plight of a young girl who is unable to assert her own will regarding marriage under patriarchal societal

system. Consequently, Zarri Bano is designated to become *Shehzadi Ibadat* (Holy Woman) through symbolic marriage with the Holy Quran. This arrangement, although framed as a traditional practice, is a manifestation of patriarchy disguised under the guise of religion, effectively using tradition to enforce patriarchal domination. Sikander, Zarri Bano's lover, conveys the dominance of the patriarchal system and its impact on women's exploitation when he states, "[Zarri Bano] has already been oppressed and exploited by her father and grandfather" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 388). When Zarri Bano, initially, dismisses his concerns, Sikander persistently pleads with her to meditate on her own identity and the stakes involved in sacrificing her autonomy. His questions to Zarri Bano challenge her to think critically about the implications of her decision: "Where have your feminist beliefs and idealism disappeared to? How can a woman of your caliber, with a university degree, a former editor of a magazine, at the end of the twentieth century, be so blinded" (Shahraz, 2001, 126)? Shahraz (2001) critiques the fundamentalist fixation on traditional gender roles and the expectation of women as carriers of culture and religion. She argues that, under the pretext of preserving the Islamic identity, women are subjected to patriarchal violence and oppression. In Pakistan, particularly in rural areas, forced marriages are widespread. Zaidi (2012) suggests that a woman's adherence to being 'chaste' and submissive may protect her from violence, whereas resistance often leads to violence and exploitation.

Female characters in the novel are depicted as 'bargaining their desires,' either to appease the men in their lives or to gain a sense of acceptance within the rigid patriarchal structures of their homes (Chaudhary & Khushi, 2015). The tradition of *Haq Bakhshawana* is central to Zarri Bano's life. This practice involves the feudal class (patriarchal system) exercising control over their females in order to preserve the feudal inheritance, particularly in the absence of a male heir. Habib Khan uses this tradition to rationalize the injustices he inflicts upon his daughter, justifying his actions as adherence to established customs of feudalism [patriarchy]. Zarri is presented with a marriage proposal from Sikander, a young and eligible suitor who is immediately captivated by her. However, Zarri's choice to visit Sikander's home and stay

there to acquaint herself with him before agreeing to the marriage surprises her grandfather, Siraj Din. Siraj Din condemns her decision of visiting Sikander's home and staying there to acquaint herself. Mumtaz and Kaur (2022) contend that Zarri Bano is portrayed as a victim of the oppression and violence entrenched in a patriarchal culture that suppresses women's capacity to articulate their emotions and aspirations. The novel critically examines the condition of women within a society that imposes a 'sacred' role upon them, requiring their total submission to religious mandates.

Patriarchy belittles the world of women by creating the four walls and advocates the notion that in a society there is only one entity, the male, that wields power, and it is this power which determines its relation to the "other". It is "sexual politics" that defines the women to be passive, meek and humble. (Ansari, p. 96)

Zarri Bano is acutely aware of the implications of being a 'Holy Woman', including the prospect of a celibate life. As a practicing Muslim, she fully recognizes her right to marry with her own consent. However, Habib Khan exerts control over her by suppressing her voice in a deeply humiliating manner. The alignment of values between father and daughter compels Zarri Bano to acquiesce to her father's directive. In this context, marriage serves as a counterpoint to "holiness," a concept that Habib Khan imposes upon his daughter. In contrast, Zari Bano expresses her resistance to these expectations by asserting that she desires to lead a conventional life and pursue marriage, distancing herself from religious fervor. She identifies herself as a modern, educated woman of the twentieth century, not as a figure constrained by the historical context of the Mughal era. Zari underscores her limited engagement with religious practices, noting that she rarely prays or reads the Holy Quran. Thus, she tells her father that becoming "a Holy Woman", is "not suited to" her (Shahraz, 2001, p. 62). And Habib's bitter reply to her requests is that "you want a man in your life" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 62). He exerts additional pressure by compelling her to conform to traditional expectations and familial obligations that ensnare many Pakistani women under patriarchal system. Despite her protests, he insists that she will comply with his directives, acknowledging their shared adherence to patriarchal tradition. He expresses confidence that



she will not disappoint him, their traditions, or her grandfather. He urges her to consider the implications of her actions for her grandfather if she cannot accept his decision. Habib Khan enforces his patriarchal authority over his daughter's body, mind, and spirit. He effectively associates the notion of 'honor' with the suppression and denial of his daughter's physical and emotional autonomy. Habib Khan's assertion that he desires a male heir ultimately coerces Zarri Bano into compliance. He undermines her sense of self by attacking her ego and manipulating her through religious pretexts. Shahraz (2001) highlights the exploitation of religion by illustrating how the patriarchal structure legitimizes the ritual of *Shahzadi Ibadat*, which continuously oppresses women through the misinterpretation of fundamental religious principles.

Zarri Bano's symbolic marriage to the Holy Quran, a practice not rooted in Islamic teachings, is seen by Habib Khan as a crucial act to preserve religious values and family honor. From a structuralist perspective, the term "holy" gains its meaning through its opposition to "unholy," with the latter term influencing the former's significance. In this framework, Habib Khan's insistence on a woman's adherence to traditional marriage expectations makes Zarri Bano acutely aware of her potential to be perceived as "unholy" in her father's eyes within the patriarchal system. This fear compels her to accept the role of a 'Holy Woman'. Jaffar's death signifies more than the loss of a son; it represents the loss of an heir to the family's feudal estate, thus threatening the patriarchal foundation upheld by Habib Khan and his father, Siraj Din. The prospect of marrying off their daughter is viewed as an "unholy" act due to the sacred status attributed to the land within the patriarchal structure. Consequently, Zarri Bano's apprehension about being branded as "unholy" compels her to exert rigid control over her sexuality. Her path to becoming a "holy" woman can be analyzed in two distinct phases. The first phase involves her initial resistance to the role of devout womanhood imposed upon her, during which she attempts to assert her right to marriage. In the second phase, after studying abroad, Zarri Bano begins to explore and understand aspects of her identity that were previously unknown. During this period, she confronts and learns to manage her sexuality,

marking a significant evolution in her character. Initially, this control is enforced by her father, but it gradually evolves into an expression of her own autonomy and intellectual engagement with Islamic teachings. Zarri's dedication to this control becomes so profound that she exhibits reluctance to pursue a conventional marital relationship, even after her marriage to Sikander. She grapples with her bodily desires, feeling tormented by them, and seeks solace in prayer. She implores Allah to guide her back to a path of peace and religious devotion, asking for the removal of the overwhelming emotions that conflict with her sense of purity. She longs to be free from the sexual desires that haunt her, wishing to be enveloped in the modesty expected of her as a devout woman. In her prayer, she asks Allah to "tear out this ugly human emotion that is renting [her] apart and torturing [her] soul (Shahraz, 2001, p. 186), and show her the righteous path, one that aligns with her spiritual aspirations and helps her overcome the inner turmoil she faces. Shahraz's (2001) shows that women's lives are continually shaped by a dichotomy between morality and immorality, which compels them to fear their own sexuality in pursuit of social acceptance. This internal conflict is vividly portrayed through the character of Zarri Bano. Her initial feminist defiance of patriarchal norms stands in stark contrast to her later life of forced celibacy and religious commitment. Shahraz's (2001) novel adopts a critical viewpoint, illustrating how women's life is circumscribed under the pretext of patriarchal tradition and religion. Further, it looks at how the western world and other non-Muslim countries view Muslim women especially those in Pakistan, which is in tandem with the belief held within the Muslim world that Islam is not only a religion but also a system of life. Ironically enough, Zarri Bano knows all the rights that are given to her by the Islamic religion as a woman. However, she remains more concerned with following the decisions made by the male members of her family. Thus, although Zarri Bano enjoys personal freedom, she experiences subjection, especially when she could not demand her right to marry Sikander. She is living a life of "pinjra" (cage) that confines all women, the key to which is in the hands of fathers or other male members in the patriarchal society. Her anguish is compounded by her awareness of the rights afforded by her religion, creating a profound irony: Zarri Bano also speaks

about what her family deprives her of these basic rights, and what position in society Islam assigns to women. As a holy woman, her case sheds light on the relationship between religion, identity, space and sexuality. While Habib Khan, her father, grants her the position of a 'Holy Woman', this promotion results in her further oppression.

When Zarri Bano decides to become a 'Holy Woman', she starts a new phase of her life; she goes back to the university to study Islam further. As a 'Holy Woman', she is required to open her own madrasa or college, and to attend Islamic conferences all over the world every time they are held. For Zarri Bano, this educational pursuit becomes her means of defiance against her father, Habib Khan. By the way she performs in her academic endeavors, she is able to convince those around her that she has become a religious and learned woman. Zarri Bano's ability to fight against an unfair life and become independent is also evidenced when the man she still has affection for, Sikander, marries her younger sister Ruby. However, Zarri Bano buries her pain and suffers through the traditions that are forced upon her, and in turn, she is bound to perform a tradition that she may not necessarily agree with. The process of Zarri Bano's self-healing entails an increase in religious practice, which is quite a change from her sporadic attendance of prayers. By praying and meditating daily, she tries to rid herself of anger and bitterness, and thus, become free from them. It is this newfound strength that empowers her to confront her sister's death and the subsequent struggles. After the death of Habib and Ruby, Zarri Bano faces an internal moral struggle of her own. Ruby's death means that she is now a young boy of two years, with no mother to take care of him. Faced with familial pressure regarding Sikander's proposal, Zarri Bano ultimately consents, prioritizing Haris's well-being above her own desires. Her decision is motivated by her deep affection for Haris, positioning her as the only close relative capable of providing the maternal support he needs.

In a nutshell, Shahraz (2001) illustrates in *The Holy Woman* how women in Pakistan have historically faced significant constraints and challenges imposed by patriarchal systems, often rationalized through state authority, religion, and cultural heritage. This patriarchal framework has profoundly influenced societal roles, shaping both

male and female identities. Patriarchal ideologies and values perpetuate belief systems that define masculine identities as the 'self' and feminine identities as the 'other.' Shahraz (2001) highlights that socio-religious practices are often manipulated and maintained to advance patriarchal interests, rather than being fundamentally supported by religion itself. She focuses on the impact of patriarchal structures within a politically biased Pakistani framework and demonstrates how religious doctrines are often manipulated to infringe upon women's fundamental human and sexual rights.

### Conclusion

A feminist analysis of the selected text reveals that in a patriarchal society, men exert dominance over women across all spheres of life, leading to their marginalization, exploitation, suppression, and otherization. It shows how the protagonist, Zarri Bano, becomes a victim of the patriarchal system, which objectifies and dominates women, reducing them to second-class citizens, the 'other,' and subaltern figures. Patriarchy is the root cause of the systemic exploitation and marginalization of women, maintained through the distortion of religious practices to validate male supremacy. Women in Pakistan are subjected to a patriarchal system that relegates them to the status of the extraneous, inconsequential, and 'other'. Shahraz (2001), the novelist, deals with emotional distress, dejection, insecurity, and fear hovering over the existence of females under patriarchal system in her novel *The Holy Woman*. She challenges the patriarchal discourse surrounding the female existence. Through Zarri Bano, the female protagonist, the novelist vividly illustrates the challenges faced by women, emphasizing themes such as suppression, sexuality, dominance, and patriarchy. The traditional notion of 'izzat' is employed to silence women, restricting them from challenging the patriarchal structures within their families. Habib Khan, Zarri Bano's father, embodies a patriarchal mindset that suppresses his daughter's desires and rights by marrying her to the Holy Quran to preserve the family inheritance. The notion of *Shahzadi Ibadator* 'Holy Woman' addresses women's sexuality while critically examining the rigid patriarchal system that empowers men to exercise control and dominance over women. Zarri Bano, as a representative of

many Pakistani women, embodies the challenges imposed by the socio-cultural practices associated with *Shahzadi Ibadat* under the patriarchal system.

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