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Deconstructing the Binary Tropes of Gender Discrimination in Shazaf Fatima Haider's How It Happened

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to analyze Shazaf Fatima Haider's How It Happened using postcolonial feminist framework and through close textual analysis, deconstructing the binarism of gender discrimination in the novel. Women within the traditional patriarchal structures are presented through Dadi's prescriptive role as she plays in the life of women through putting across structured belief system which dominates women's existence. Dadi's admonitions, such as the notion that "good girls marry boys of their mothers' choice," reinforce the binary division between obedient women and rebellious ones, stripping women of agency in both marriage and emotional autonomy. These Social, institutional and cultural norms served and depicted women as only valuable in the kitchen or as sex objects that silence women and value them in comparison to men. By caricaturing these gender roles, Haider addresses social and institutional unfreedom for women still judged by society as unfit if they don't conform to traditional gender roles. Mainstreaming the conflict between women's power and desire for freedom, Haider's novel raises questions about colonial gendered perspectives, opposing their continuation, and calls to rethink these constructions to free women from these male-dominate definitions. Thus, through such binaries, How It Happened helps to deepen a conversation on gender, culture and postcolonial feminism.

1. Introduction

In tracing the social contexts of gender relationships within the contexts of contemporary Pakistani society, *How It Happened* by Shazaf Fatima Haider is as vitalizing as it is stimulating. Essentially, the novel deals with the question of keeping the current power relations that gaslight women in various social and institutional contexts (Zahid, Mujahid, & Hussain, 2023). This paper aims to analyze Haider's novel for its postcolonial feminist perspective and complicity from the perspective of the paradoxes of binary gender discrimination that underlie the text. For example, women are often shown as either "liberated" or "oppressed," "modern" or "traditional." These stereotypes show how tense things are in a society that is

changing quickly. They also show how colonialism has left lasting effects on gender relations in the postcolonial societies.

This study lies in the requirement to challenge these dichotomous constructions of gender that have been put forth by both colonial and postcolonial discursive formations. According to the foregoing explanations, postcolonial feminism offers an idea that does not subscribe to a single-dimensional notion of gender, especially in regions that have been colonized. Haider's novel questions the traditional gender roles of the characters. Therefore, the research objectives of this paper are as follows: First, it looks at how Haider uses postcolonial feminist perspective to question these kinds of discursive formations of subjectivity. It tries to explain why stereotypes of masculinity and femininity still rule Pakistani society, even though society is changing. Secondly, it will look at how these binaries work within the novel's representation of institutional discrimination and the themes of biases, family, and education that remain oppressive to women. Third, the paper attempts to investigate the cultural aspects of gendered prejudice to discuss how culture constructs women's position and restricts their freedom.

Hence, this paper also argues that Haider's novel challenges the dominant bainaries of postcolonial discourse by looking at the subtleties of gendered issues in the developing society. Far from putting women in either the role of victims or as revolutionaries, Haider's characters encompass a spectrum of female response to their oppression from subtle rebellion to outright defiance that has the potential to change societal structures. Consequently, her characters defy categorization and portray the multifaceted nature of gender in the contemporary era. So, this supports a broader, more intersectional approach within the "feminist movement."

2. Literature Review

2.1. Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism is another rubric that focuses on combining the issues of feminism with issues of colonization; all or at least certain aspects of cultures. Postcolonial feminism adopts current oppressed feminist worldviews, asserting that patriarchy in colonized societies privileges women (Al-Wazedi, 2020). Although the earlier form of the Western feminist theories have been accused of erasing the other, the postcolonial feminism is more interested in charting the specific ways in which gendered oppression manifests within postcolonial societies (Mohanty, 1988). From this perspective, Spivak's (1988) postcolonial feminist theory challenges the manner in which colonial discourses map and colonial women's identities into passive roles in history. Through gender, race, class, and coloniality, postcolonial feminism makes it possible for gender roles and relations to be understood from a postcolonial perspective in postcolonial societies.

Within the postcolonial framework and in reference to South Asia specifically, or Pakistan for example, postcolonial feminism resists the colonial as well as patriarchal imperialism in constructing and reinforcing gender relations (Kiran, 2023). Women in these societies find themselves in the middle of between postcolonial rule and regulations, or cultural beliefs and practices of these societies.

2.2. Binary Tropes in Gender Discrimination

Binary conceptions of gender have always been the focus of feminist discussion (Saguy, Reifen-Tagar & Joel, 2021). Patriarchal dualisms, like active/passive, modern/traditional, or liberated/oppressed, erase differences and break up gendered practices, which gets rid of variety and difference (Jay, 1981). These binary systems serve to reinforce power dynamics, often marginalizing women by positioning them as "other" or subordinate to the dominant male norm. In a work such as The Second Sex, first published in 1949, Beauvoir claimed that the binarism when established is at the heart of the slavery of women by men as they are labeled as 'the other' as opposed to men 'the Self (Butler, 1998).

Postcolonial feminism dismisses the binaries as simplistic reductionism that fails to adequately address the real experiences of women (Ochoa, 1996). For example, the binary trope of "modern" versus "traditional" often fails to acknowledge how women's agency in both contexts is shaped by historical, social, and political forces. This is an especially pertinent trope in postcolonial societies because the tensions that define modernity and tradition play out between the globalized West and localized, local societies in which women find themselves trying to construct identities. There are two main ideas in Haider's book that are about gender roles and how they affect women's lives in their families, in society, and in the bigger conversations about modernity happening around the world.

2.3. Social, Institutional, and Cultural Discrimination against Women in Postcolonial Societies

In postcolonial societies, gender discrimination is perpetrated through social, institutional, and cultural methodology that discriminates against women. Socially, the male-dominated culture firmly anchors women into wifely, motherly, and caring roles. These roles often restrict women's access to education, employment, and personal growth (Chaudhry, 2017). In most places, discrimination based on gender is supported by power structures that were left over from colonization and did not protect women's rights or put women under the control of their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. For example, Mahmood (2005) underlines that, in Pakistan, though women are formally allowed to enter into marriage under certain rights and allowed some inheritance rights, patriarchal family organization systematically deprives them of those rights. This also holds true of educational institutions that, while prescribing stereotypical gender roles for women, also provide curricular and institutional structures that deny women the chance to lead or even engage in academic study.

In cultural perspective, women's experiences are particularly shaped by the existing culture and the media messages that conspire to support the traditional model of women/female sexuality and sexual morality. These norms, grounded in colonial and indigenous forms of patriarchy, classify what is tolerable and permissible for women and what is not. Once again, the roles of motherhood and wifehood seal the biosomes of women, making them objects of public veneration (Kandiyoti, 1988). These social, institutional, and cultural agencies emerge in Haider's novel as the characters strive to meet the expectations of their family, society, and culture.

2.4. Previous Studies on *How It Happened* by Shazaf Fatima Haider

While *How It Happened* has gotten some attention for showing modern Pakistani life, its portrayal of gender discrimination has not been closely looked at as a work of postcolonial feminism yet. Previous research has shown that Haider's work is mostly about the generation gap, modern malaise, and the westernization of culture in Pakistan. Other critics, like Rizvi, have looked at Haider's ideas about family relationships and how desire and duty are at odds with each other. All of these works show how Haider challenges the oppression of women in both the public and private spheres. A more specific focus on gender discrimination reveals how Haider deconstructs binary gender tropes, showing that women in her novel are not easily categorized as either "empowered" or "subjugated." The analysis of Haider's work made by Syed and Ali (2018) pinpoint the protagonists of the novel as enjoying a form of liminal agency, which may be reframed from the usual definition of women's emancipation. The characters of *How It Happened* are sophisticated individuals who cannot fit into the assigned either the antagonist or the protagonist roles of the male or female gender roles. These complexities, as pointed out by Shamsi (2020), open up the possibility for scholars to incorporate gender, class as well as postcolonialism as richly as possible.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this research is postcolonial feminism, which was popularised by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her 1988 paper 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1988 essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Fundamental to this strategy is the non-acceptance of a western, generalized feministic approaches used most of the time without consideration of the historical, cultural, political forces relevant to non-western women. In contrast, postcolonial feminism focuses on the exploration of colonial-imprinting of gender roles and how such imprints influence the current gender discrimination. Moreover, as will be highlighted in this work, binary gender tropes, an important area of interest in postcolonial feminisms, are dismantled. Binary systems, such as the traditional dichotomies of "modern" vs. "traditional" or "empowered" vs. "oppressed," serve to oversimplify and marginalize women's lived experiences. These binaries are considerably evident in postcolonial cultures since postcolonial societies reiterate colonialism in gender roles constructions (Mongia 2021).

Applying postcolonial feminism as the theoretical paradigm for the analysis, this paper demonstrates how the novel *How It Happened* by Shazaf Fatima Haider subverts and critiques the colonialist discursive constructions of gender discrimination through social, institutional, and cultural frameworks. It is in this sense that the paper will attend to the ways in which the systems of power examined by Haider's characters and characters are not simply gender, but are instead something more complex – a gender that is fluid, that is mutable, that is already a part of the postcolonial landscape. Where colonial criticism may attend only to the colonial themes in Haider's novel, postcolonial feminism offers the scholar the lens through which to consider colonialism and patriarchal domination in terms of interlocking systems of oppression.

3.2. Methodology

This research study utilizes a qualitative research approach and therefore utilize text analysis as its main research method. The most important concern is devoted to the search for cases of gender discrimination in the narrative and the subsequent analysis of how the text reflects and subverts colonial or postcolonial gender norms. The main source of theoretical analysis of this work is the novel *How It Happened* by Shazaf Fatima Haider. As for the structure of the gender relations in postcolonial society the novel is analyzed in terms of the role assignment and power relations between male and female characters as well as the role of cultural and social institutions in maintaining male domination. The analysis focuses on the following key areas: these as include Social Discrimination, Institutional Discrimination; and Cultural Discrimination. Therefore, extending the scope of the investigation to such manifestations of oppression as social, institutional, and cultural, this paper enriches the existing discussion on postcolonial identity grounded in the indigenous critical method alongside intersectional approaches to gender literary studies.

4. Findings

By articulating its author's vision of how the fantasy world works and interpreting characters like Malaika Phuppo, it stages a protest against the sexualization of women and their relegation to domestic roles as obedient woman-child entities with no identity beyond their looks. The building blocks of binary gender tropes as the rallying cry of individual merits of man as opposed to the slavish relegation of women to their marital and domestic status are a core part of straw feminism. Through satire, it challenges the deeply ingrained toxic ideals and practices in society, empowering female characters to insist on the eradication of oppressive systems and postcolonial cultural determinants.

5. Discussion and Analysis

As epitomized by Dadi's statement, *'All good girls marry boys of their mother's choice (p. 7).'* Dadi creates two unexceptional female traits, the obedient daughter and the obedient wife, whose worth lies in their conformity to social expectations. The use of *"good girls"* creates a binary trope, dividing women into obedient, virtuous individuals versus deviant, rebellious ones who assert their autonomy. By restricting *"choice"* to the domain of mothers and implicitly, the family patriarch agency is denied to the woman whose life is most affected by the decision. Making a stark comment on the institutionalization of patriarchy and oppression of women, "That's it! (11).". The phrase "pleasing God and our husbands" ties religious piety directly to marital subservience, conflating spiritual fulfillment with adherence to patriarchal norms. The dismissal of romantic love as "nonsense" highlights the cultural mechanisms that stigmatize female autonomy in emotional and marital matters. Dadi's portrayal of love as the superficial, while duty as the substantive, reflects the cultures' shunning of personal wants and embracing family responsibilities. The belittling term "love-shove" trivializes women's emotional depth and delegitimizes their right to choose partners based on mutual affection. Dadi's rhetoric constructs a binary between *"sensible Bandian women"* and those who might defy norms by pursuing love. Here the right word, sensibility, equates to obedience, while the word sensuality, which refers to freedom, translates to irresponsibility or, specifically, promiscuity. This is similar to colonial discourses that aimed at managing female sexuality and in so doing painted those who did not conform as deviant. Through such a technique, Haider forces the reader to look beyond the common raw

oppression of women and look deeper into the culture that perpetuates it. The text can, therefore, be read as a powerful condemnation of the socio-cultural structures that exclude women from being full subjects and citizens in the name of tradition and duty.

The characterization of Malaika Phuppo as having *"two passions: her husband and her shoes (p. 19)"* encapsulates the reduction of women's identities to superficial roles within patriarchal and consumerist frameworks. From the postcolonial feminism point of view, the emphasis on her husband shows how women's value reduces the worth of a man in society and perpetuates a patriarchal society. At the same time, her love for shoes entrenches gender stereotype caricaturing women as selfish, illogical and trivial beings with silly dreams. The fact that it is repeated uncovers a pattern of patriarchal culture, on the one hand, restricting women to the home front, on the other hand exploiting their branding. Through juxtaposing the two passions of Malaika, the author, Haider, presents his critique to the two frameworks that pervade the women's agency and the cultural factors that support them.

> *"Haroon Bhai was Dadi's favourite subject. 'Doestn't my Haroon look like a prince in this photograph? (19)"*

Dadi's adoration of Haroon as a *"prince"* showcases the preferential treatment of male figures, where their worth is established through individual traits and achievements, rather than adherence to familial control. Dadi also shows the cultural preference of men, as she especially favors her grandson, Haroon. Her comment about Haroon looking *"like a prince"* illustrates the cultural celebration of masculinity, tying male identity to power and prestige. This is a strong contrast to the cultures that women were expected to meet before they were considered worthy of marriage or any value in society. Sulky cultural narratives are to enhance a patriarchal helium in the male unit of the family, celebrating the man as pride and restringing the woman to inferior domains. These patterns contextualize the postcolonial feminist perspective, highlighting how colonialism-colored tradition persists in invalidating the female sex. These are the binary tropes explained in the text: women are put into moral prisons, while men are given the full freedom they need to explain the continued perpetuation of patriarchal cultural norms. Haider's postcolonial feminist critique enjoins the reader to rethink these structures, asking them to undo the binaries altogether that still influence gender identities.

Dadi's assertion that Haroon's prospective bride *"must be qualified to get a good job" yet "must not want to get a job (p. 33)"* encapsulates the paradoxical expectations imposed on women in patriarchal societies. It shows how gender discrimination became part of culture, as education for women would be appropriate if its aim was to make them better brides. The system of prioritizing qualifications while not allowing women to exercise them creates an empty shell of an education system that does not allow women the right to chart out their ambitions. Through analyzing *How It Happened*, it is visible that the marriage institution plays crucial roles in reinforcing gender power relations. Women are required to be homemakers, and men are supposed to be breadwinners. This institutional setup exemplifies structural oppression, as society consistently expects women to be at least as capable as men, if not more so. Furthermore, the adage "What are men for?" echoes this sentiment. As much as it goes with the Christian identity of men as providers and women as dependents, it also holds a vicious cycle of patriarchy for the men. So, Haider wants us to rethink these performances and picture a Pakistan that is full of different kinds of people, where women are free to write

their own stories of freedom from the limiting categories of the institutionalized gendered world.

The dismissive remark, "Pilots are totally unacceptable because we all know that when they are not flying planes, they are despoiling air hostesses, (p. 33), exemplifies how institutional roles are laden with moral judgments, particularly for women. On top of that, it reinforces the idea that women should be reduced to simple, overused stereotypes. It also hides a culture that sees it as cool that some jobs are looked down upon because of sexist assumptions about what is right and wrong based on gender. This aligns with the common criticism in postcolonial feminism that society normalizes a woman's behavior while absolving the man of any wrongdoing. Similarly, the criteria for a suitable bride, encapsulated in phrases like "She must be from a decent family (p. 33)" and "She must be shorter than Haroon Bhai (p. 33)," reflect the deeply ingrained cultural discrimination rooted in patriarchal ideologies. Such standards create women as vessels of familial honor and beauty, and they have no sense of themselves. Focusing on features such as decency and bodily characteristics like height and complexion, the text shows contempt for societal standards that rob personal experiences of true compatibility or worth beyond superficial and chauvinistic values. Further, the insistence on physical attributes, as in "She must have long, silky, thick hair as opposed to the curls that Haroon Bhai (p. 33)" and "she mustn't be anything but dazzlingly fair" (p. 33), underscores the intersection of gender and postcolonial racial biases. The Indian beauty ideals that have been perpetuated over the past years of postcolonial rule represent the colonial roots of colorism and its continuing effects in South Asia. Haider illustrates these binary tropes as purely satirical, forcing the reader to analyze the illogic and sheer unfairness of such popular social trends. Analyzing the novel in terms of social, institutional, and cultural prejudices, it is possible to place it under the discussion of postcolonial feminism, which calls for the abolishment of oppressive gender structures.

Saleha narrates that *"So we intertwined six girls for Haroon Bhai (p. 41)"* starkly depicts the objectification and dehumanization of women, whose individuality is erased as they are bundled together into a pool of potential brides. The verb "intertwined" suggests a deliberate manipulation, reducing the women to interchangeable components of a matchmaking process. This concerns the organizational practices with regard to considering male interests and placing women through coercive social validation processes that maintain their inferiority within the male-dominated hierarchy. Similarly, *"The list of acceptable girls to show to Haroon" (p. 37)* underscores the systematic filtering of women based on arbitrary and often superficial criteria dictated by patriarchal values. The use of "acceptable" highlights the social norms that narrowly define women's worth through their ability to conform to pre-established ideals, such as beauty, family background, and demeanor. Postcolonial feminism poses these; the assertion that such norms are colonial creations and reiterations of cultural patriarchal impositions. And the conditionality in *"If the first session was successful, then the second meeting would be arranged for Haroon Bhai to see and approve (p. 37)"* encapsulates the institutionalized male privilege embedded in the matchmaking process. The progression from a first meeting to a second, based solely on the man's "approval," starkly contrasts with the lack of agency granted to women, whose preferences are either ignored or subsumed under familial expectations. This practice also aggravates cultural discrimination through the establishment of, and continuing to rely on the notion that value is sectioned to men alone, thus extending women's marginalization further.

> *"She's pretty. Not beautiful. A little too thin. Haroon, you should tell her to gain some weight. Men like women with a little more flesh on them. The way she is right now, she will prick you like a thorn, which won't make your nights at all comfortable, let me tell you!'(p. 65)*

The distinction between "pretty" and "beautiful" highlights the rigid beauty standards imposed on women, emphasizing superficial attributes as a primary criterion for acceptance. Postcolonial feminism realizes it as colonial legacy through which cultural aesthetics are determined by standards set by colonial masters, thereby further oppression of women who do not fit into such aesthetics. Moreover, the directive for Haroon to instruct the girl to gain weight, *"Men like women with a little more flesh on them (p. 65)"*, demonstrates the institutionalized belief that women's bodies exist to satisfy male preferences. This simply supports the bigger systematic thinking in allowing the man to determine what his wife or any woman for that matter should do with her body over her own decision. The metaphorical warning that *"she will prick you like a thorn"* (p. 65) if she remains thin further reduces the woman to her physicality, implying that her primary role in marriage is to ensure the husband's comfort—both physical and emotional. The casual use of such statement that signify a woman's body as either, sumptuous to male hegemonic eyes and therefore give them pleasure or a thorn in a man's flesh, a repulsive entity, is a way of ensuring that gender discrimination maintains itself and perpetuates the subjugation of women, robbing them of their humanity and reducing them to vessels for the continuously stereotyping patriarchy. By doing so, the novel follows the postcolonial Feminist theory to examine and dismantle the Binary constructs ingrained in the gender discriminations, for the society to embrace that does not bound the worth and respectability of women with conformity to cultural and institutional shame.

"Good girls should be seen and not heard" (p. 67) illustrates the institutionalized practice that women must remain submissive and not speak out in public. In postcolonial feminism, these expectations are deeply ingrained in both community culture and colonialism, which sought to silence women's voices and reduce them to mere objects, willing to submit to the authority of their male counterparts. Likewise, the quote, *"And did you hear? She can't cook! A woman is incomplete if she doesn't know her way around the kitchen!" (p. 71)* proves the social ideologies of the period as well as the most dangerous one, according to which a woman is the family's asset, whose value is determined by her ability to maintain a home. In many of these societies, the belief is further engorged by the post-colonial, culturally imposed role of women as being caretakers of the family and homebound. The idea of a woman being "incomplete" without cooking skills reflects the deep-seated cultural belief that a woman's primary function is to maintain the home and serve her family. This institutionalized expectation perpetuates the gendered division of labor and informs a sexist understanding that values women's worth in domestic roles, not as intelligent or unique individuals. Moreover, *"we women are built to have children, to create families" (p. 159)* underscores the reduction of women to their biological roles. This quote shows what the culture expects women to do: bear children and focus mainly on the family. Postcolonial feminism challenges this perspective, viewing it not only as oppressive but also as a remnant of colonialism that exploited women's reproductive potential to uphold social order. By promoting this idea, the institutional structure restricts women's control over their bodies and life decisions, and their available roles are limited to those of a mother figure. Saleha's question to Dadi, *"Why don't I have the same right?"* and Dadi's reply, *"Because you are a girl and should be thankful that he*

wants to marry you at all!" (163) highlights the deeply ingrained gender inequality in marriage practices. This particular exchange serves as a clear illustration of the disregard and denial of women's rights due to their gender. Dadi's response seeks to remind women of their duty of accepting any form of attention or being flaunted, no matter their age or preference, just as long as marriage is the end goal, independent of the wishes or goals of the woman in question. This denial of women's autonomy and the objectification of their worth through the worth of their marital or feminine virtue uphold the reinforcement of patriarchal institutional and cultural politics of gendered subordination. Such ideologies reveal that these patriarchal and colonial gender foibles have continued to haunt women, asserting that, however, they are not the masters of their own fates but are silent objects.

6. Conclusion

Shazaf Fatima Haider through fictional characters depicts social, institutional, and cultural factors which are used to discriminate against women in traditional patriarchal settings. Through the character of Dadi and her prescriptions for *"good girls"* and their roles, Haider critiques the reduction of women to their domestic, obedient selves while men are celebrated for their individuality and autonomy. The exaggeration of these norms reveals the ridiculousness of gender differential treatment, suggesting that the readers should question the cultural and institutional perpetration of women's unfreedom.

Haider reveals that the framework of postcolonial feminism can explain how colonial patriarchy remains relevant in current society. The novel also encourages an analysis of social norms and structures that continue to discriminate against women and challenges readers to build a society where women would not be valued by how they are measured by the existing male-dominated hierarchies. So, deconstruction in Haider's work can be seen as the breaking down of these binary gender roles that they frame, showing society and women in particular how they can position themselves without having to strictly follow tradition.

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