

**A CRITIQUE OF IMPULSES, DRAWBACKS AND CHALLENGES TO PAKISTANI WOMEN'S WRITING IN ENGLISH**Musaib Junejo<sup>1</sup>, Tania Shaikh<sup>2</sup>, Ume Rabab Shah<sup>3</sup>, Faiza Altaf<sup>4</sup>**Original Article**

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**Abstract**

*Pakistani literature in English being integral part of wider postcolonial canon is now recognized and approved in academia as literature of its own. Today, a number of writers hailing from different socio-political backgrounds are contributing to the English writing in Pakistan. In this variety of authors Pakistani women occupy critical position. This research paper aims to analyze and understand invisible factors and impetuses that result in production of this bulk of literature. The paper will also study contemporary drawbacks and future challenges to women's writing in Pakistan. The findings of the study reveal that, Pakistani women write in English in order to challenge the powerful religious and political factions that undermine their position in society. Besides, English language provides them voice that is to be heard at international arena. Furthermore, women's writing is exaggerated, melodramatic, political and monotonous. In comparison to Indian women writing, Pakistani woman writing is naïve and unsophisticated. Moreover, Pakistani women's writers face challenges like rising extremism and reconciling feminism and Islam in the fiction. Thus, the paper will help understand the worth, degree of influence and future prospective of women in literary field.*

**Keywords:** Women Writers; Pakistani English Fiction; Motivations; Drawbacks; Challenges

**Introduction**

The scope of English literature is rapidly rising from the island of Great Britain to its formal colonies in recent years. Commonwealth literature as we know, is one of those many prospering English literatures (Edwards, 2008). In this regard, Pakistani literature in English is categorized under the commonwealth literature by the critics and researchers as it came into being as a result of British colonization of subcontinent. So, the roots of Pakistani English literature lie in the colonial India. In that period of time patriarchy dominated the subcontinent owing to high illiteracy. Men were in privileged conditions and women were treated harshly and it was justified in the name of tradition and religion. Women were considered as bodies where they will strive to gain dignity and respect.

It was difficult for women to express their stance as a result we see anti-colonial struggle for independence was led by men from the front. But the good part, women have never remained passive in these times. Though slow and late but they emerged and started contributing to all the domains including literature. In this regard there are a number of Pakistani women writers who produce fiction in English. Muslim women started writing in English even before the independence e.g. Mumtaz Shahnawaz. This late and slow rise of women's writing in English continued with social

and political turmoil in the Pakistan. But after 21<sup>st</sup> century there was boom in quality as well as quantity of women writings in English.

In this regard people with keen interest in Pakistani English literature raise some fundamental question like; Why Pakistani women write in English? What is the motivation behind it? What are the loopholes in writing of Pakistani women? What are the future challenges to women's writing in English? In this regard the study will try to answer above questions. These answers will help the readers to understand the scope and invisible factors that covertly effect women writers in Pakistan. The paper will discuss the impulses behind and influences on Pakistani women writings in English. At points study will also compare the writing from Pakistani women with that of Indian Women in order to have a complete view of impending scenario. At the tail, researcher will discuss the loopholes in women's writing in English with a glance at future challenges.

### **Pakistani women writers in search of motivation**

Pakistani women's writing in English began in British India under the patronage of British Empire in 19<sup>th</sup> century. It all started with the few upper class women and their education in English medium schools. In the regard role of educationalists like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan is very crucial. As Hashmi (1990) states that English writing in Pakistan emerged when Muslims in British India embraced the English language and took a step towards modern education after Sir Syed's educationist movement. Since then Pakistani writers are perpetually producing fiction in English. In this regard this section is a critique of the possible factors that encourage women writers from Pakistan to produce English fiction.

Pakistani women writers are coming out with English writing since the very first day of independence. Except some short intermittent periods, Pakistani's of both genders, are persistently producing English literature. But in recent times, there is unprecedented surge in the English fiction writing by Pakistani authors. It has always been an interesting subject of discussion for literary critics to study the encouraging factors behind this rapid rise in English writing in Pakistan. Shamsie (2017) refers to three major reasons: wide international readership, writing back to empire and economic benefits. These can be general encouraging factors for both genders, so we will avoid discussing them. Because Pakistani fiction in English can't be considered as single homogenous entity. Under this umbrella term there are multiple variants e.g. diasporic and local writing, men and women's writing. Each group of writers has their peculiar ways of selecting and treating subject. According to Hudson (1918) comes out with his literary formula of race, milieu and moment. Taine argues that two literary works can't be considered similar to each other if they are product of different ages or of different genders and races. He argues that race/gender always remains a motivating force behind production of literature. Similarly, Pakistani fiction produced by women is distinctly different from that produced by men with multiple diverging points. But that is not the subject of discussion for us. Here the emphasis of study will be to point out the triggering forces that are particular to Pakistani women writers who produce fiction in English.

Starting from the very simple and basic argument, it can be a personal preference of Pakistani women to write in English. It implies adroitness and familiarity with language. Mostly Pakistani women who write in English are members of Pakistani diaspora in United Kingdom or United States (Lisa, 2002). For them it is convenient to write in English language. The remaining ones, who are at home belong to elite class, educated in English medium schools feel easy to communicate in English. So, to these women writers, English suits for smooth expression of ideas and stories. Undoubtedly, they have made a conscious choice to write in English.

Secondly, Pakistan is a multicultural and multilingual society. It is amalgamation of people belonging to multiple ethnic and linguistic groups. This same goes for the writing community as well. Pakistani women English writers are not homogenous when it comes to their culture and language. Therefore,

diversity in writing community will spilt up their voice if they write in their respective mother tongues, having splinted readerships. Woman's voice is already lower and this division will add insult to injury. They will be unable to generate a collective powerful voice that can challenge the forces of oppression. In this regard Narasimhaiah & Srinath (1986) argues that English in South Asian societies provide a certain degree of freedom to women that their mother tongue is unable to grant. There are certain prejudices you carry based on particular community you are born in. To get recognition, you are bound to express those prejudices in your speech. But, when you write in a language that is unfamiliar to that community, you get freedom from those preconceived expressions which otherwise you are bound to express. On a larger scale, English fiction is helpful medium that unites the voice of Pakistani women with that of women from other postcolonial nations as India in order to challenge the empire. So, English offers a neutral unified platform to the women writers where they can make themselves heard, which otherwise is near to impossible in multicultural society.

Thirdly, Pakistan mostly remained under the rule of military dictatorships. Even if there were civilian governments, they were hijacked by powerful rightist religious forces. So these two powerful forces of Pakistani society (military and mosque) have always remained a barrier in the expression (Haqqani, 2016). In these conditions it was very impossible for women writers to produce non-fictional in the form of facts and history and directly castigate extremist religious class and powerful dictators. Censorship increased and publishing houses were under the influence of government. The only way for women to write for their rights was symbolic fiction writing in English and publish it through international publishers in India, England or America. Perhaps English fiction is the only way to get around facts in Pakistan (Rahman, 2015). This was difficult, but still an opportunity to indirectly expose the ills of these powerful forces in Pakistan who denied rights particularly to women. When veracious history writing is unbearable and dangerous, then it becomes a need to scribble truth in the form of fiction. Women fiction writing in the words of Kanwal & Aslam (2018) "As if to fly under the radar of censorship's scrutiny, as if to say: look this is harmless; I am only writing about my dysfunctional family; I am not writing about the state; it is just a family saga" (p. 133). So, in this way fiction writing in Pakistan for women is way of protesting and showing discontent and still not getting arrested. Woman's writing is woman's fighting for honesty, equality and freedom (Narasimhaiah & Srinath, 1986). In addition to these few impetuses, there could be many other reasons that inspire Pakistani women to write in English. On the other hand, there might be potential faults in their choice of subject matter and language of expression.

#### **Contemporary drawbacks and future challenges to Pakistani women's writing in English:**

Since the start of this century there is extraordinary increase in women's writing in English when we study literature of sub-continent. Out of blue there is huge development and women's fiction in Pakistan is reaching heights. With this Pakistani literature in English has got approval and recognition of being a distinguished literature. But along with this burgeoning significance there are areas left behind and especially women writers couldn't do justice. These contemporary drawbacks result in future challenges. Researcher will try to address both drawbacks and challenges to get the bottom of things.

Many critics complain repetition of similar themes in women's writing over and over again. This has made their writing monotonous. Pakistani women writers are easily recognizable in global literary circles owing to their insistence on limited themes. Stories driven from historical and political background with emphasis on female characters become emblem of their works. Recurring themes include women's victimization, social disillusionments, relationship and betrayals, political upheavals and cultural hybridity. These themes are found in Mumtaz Shahnawaz' novel *Heart Divided*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*, Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* and Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. This ironically limits the scope as readers have preconceived

notion that Pakistani women's writing must feature such themes and no other. Majority of novels usually extract their content from chosen political events like partition, Zia's religious extremism as in Uzma Aslam Khan's *Geometry of God*, Afghan Jihad as in Tehmina Durrani's *Happy Things in Sorrow Times* cultural hybridity as in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* and 9/11 as in Kamila Shamsie's *Brunt Shadow*. Therefore in future there is an increasing danger that Pakistani women's writing will be stereotypical.

Furthermore, looking at the diversity of country and its population this is very unlikely that all these women writers choose to address same themes. In addition to it there is constant fear among the critics that, Pakistani women's literature in English is increasingly becoming a product of one particular class. This further limits the scope of it as almost all writers and most of readers are from upper class. Pakistani women's literature is disparaged, pointless and elitist (Shamsie, 2017). Majority of prominent women writers live in diaspora e.g. Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie and Fatima Bhutto. Even those who are in Pakistan are either educated in universities of England or America e.g. Bina Shah and Moni Mohsin. On the other hand this is not the case with Pakistan's neighbor in the east. In India there are multiple women English fiction writers who belong to middle or lower class with degrees from local universities. Indian women's writing in English is increasingly becoming Indianized (Margret, 2016). But unfortunately, things are at the odds in Pakistan as writing is developing with but writers' class is flattening. Therefore, the Damocles sword is always hanging over women's writing that it will be titled stereotypical owing to insufficient themes, and representation of just powerful elitist class.

Secondly, Pakistani women's writing is and becoming more and more political. Mostly Stories and themes emerge from political issues- national as well as international. The very first novel in women's writing-*Heart Divided*- by Mumtaz Shahnawaz is based on regional political issue of partition. Pakistani fiction (of both genders) is extremely politicized (Ciliano, 2013). Ciliano artfully describes the connections between Pakistani nation, state and fiction writing. Mostly, raw material of women's fiction comes from either partition as in Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, fall of Dhaka as in Sorayya Kahn's *Noor*, Zia's extremism as in Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*, Afghan war and refugees as in Tehmina Durrani's *Happy Things in Sorrow Times*, and 9/11 as in Kamila Shamsie's *Brunt shadows*. In this regard Ciliano (2013) argues that Pakistan as a country always remained a hot cauldron of power struggle. From military, Kashmir, 9/11, Afghan War to marshal laws, it was and still is in state of political turmoil. So there is a lot of raw material for creative writers here in this field. But, sadly it had distracted writers from more immediate and important issues. Fiction writing had sadly become a part of that dirty game of politics and power struggle. On the other side of border the case is not similar. Indian women writers have no longer political issues in their minds (Chatterjee, 1996). Indian women's writing insists upon and addresses local issues (Brinks, 2016). So, that is one of the challenges for women writers in Pakistan to make a shift from political themes and move on to more important issues of essence.

Feminist fiction, especially South Asian with its use of hyperbole, exaggeration and conceits is very much dramatized (Mohanty, 2003). Pakistani women's writing is no exception to it. Women writers mostly overemphasize upon themes and stories and make them sensational. In this case Pakistani women writers scandalously portray the culture they belong to in front of western audience. Waterman (2015) aptly titles Pakistani women's writing as melodramatic. Western audience might be fascinated by such exaggerated matters in fiction but it provokes indignation and anger in local readers. Mohanty claims that this approach weakens women's case rather strengthening it. South Asian women writers create texts that defame women victims and belittles them as illiterate and innocent. They impugn their own stance by objectifying woman while combating attempts of objectification (Mohanty, 2003). One can ferret out the causes behind this exaggeration in women's

writing. It might be sensitive and receptive nature of women that they perceive danger more than its degree. Secondly, it might be deliberate and well thought of to gain more sympathy and readership in west. English fiction is western reader's window to Pakistan (Ciliano, 2013). Mostly readership of these writers is in west having particular construction of third world and prefer reading kitschy stories of developing countries. Pakistani women writers are apprised of this as most of them are part of diaspora and they exploit this market. So, this narrow approach became a matter of constant criticism and condemnation against women's writing. In addition to these few, there can be bulk of other denigrating factors which can cause harm to burgeoning repute of Pakistani women writers.

Besides this Pakistan is considered as Muslim country with powerful and influential rightist religious parties. Pakistani fiction either it be English or of any other local language is called Islamic literature. Haqqani (2016) mocks over this outlook of literature and questions, Can literature be follower of a religion like man? But, religion is very sensitive issue to even a layman in Pakistan. In this critical ambience, it becomes a challenging task for women to come out in defiance of male authority. Feminism and ideas fastened with it considered western, anti-Islamic, and misleading. Therefore, Pakistani Muslim women writers are facing with the challenges of defending and defining their religious identity (Chuadhary, 2013). To embrace Islamic thought on one hand and subsume feminist ideas on other, need special providence. Converging two apparently irreconcilable school of thoughts is one the biggest challenge to young Pakistani women writers. Nevertheless, with all these potential pitfalls and stumbling blocks, Pakistani women are remarkably writing literature in English.

### Conclusion

Women writers are contributing to Pakistani English literature since independence. The burgeoning bulk of their writing especially after the 21<sup>st</sup> century is praiseworthy and a positive sign. But literary readers must think about the reasons of rapid rise in both quality and quantity of women's writing in English. Moreover, one can't even deny the drawbacks in their creative writing. Thus there are number of challenges as well that can hinder the rise of women's writing in Pakistan. Therefore the paper is an endeavor to discuss and understand these crucial ideas.

Impulses behind writing English fiction are unique when it comes to women. The motivation for them is both intrinsic as well as extrinsic. Women writers are representatives of their gendered community. They might feel safe to communicate in English through fiction so as to escape baseless charges of blasphemy and treachery. Moreover, keeping diversity of the country in mind one always searches for a common platform to rise a homogenous loud voice collectively, English unlike other languages, is that undisputed unifying force in the midst diversity. On a larger scale, English fiction is helpful medium that unites the voice of Pakistani women with that of women from other postcolonial nations as India so as to challenge empire. Besides, women's writing clashes with culturally constructed norms of purity and chastity of women.

Pakistani women's writing has got the momentum needed but there are certain loopholes in it that might be future challenges. Their Writing lacks thematic variety and stylistic diversity that we witness in Pakistani society. Women writer build their works on some meagre themes that are over bleakly sensationalized, usually adopted from politics. This approach can narrow down the burgeoning scope of particularly women's fiction and generally Pakistani. In addition it can also harm women's own cause of getting sympathy and resultantly equality. Besides, women has to go parallel with apparently contradicting ideas- Islam and Feminism. Though we can't keep an eye off these faults and challenges but there is always a lot of vibrancy and positivity so, one must feel optimistic about Pakistani women's writing in English

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