

# Challenging Gender Stereotypes: A Text Analysis of Qaisra Shehraz's Novel *the Holy Woman*

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**Abstract.** Gender stereotypes are the mind sets of the society practiced years after years. Men and women are assigned gender roles according to these already set patterns. As a result of practicing these gender stereotypes, women are assigned weaker position as compared to men. This paper is aimed at challenging the gender stereotypes and highlighting the emancipation of women in the backdrop of the views presented by the feminists and the gender theorists. Text analysis is used as a research method and qualitative mode of research inquiry is adopted. The text of Qaisra Shehraz's novel, *The Holy Woman*, is analyzed in milieu of the feminist and gender theories. The research findings reveal that there is gender stereotyping and gender biasedness in this novel as practiced by the male and female characters of the novels but these gender stereotypes are challenged thus resulting in the changed gender roles and the emancipated women characters.

**Keywords:** Binary Opposition, Feminism, Gender Stereotypes, the Other.

## 1. Introduction

Men and women both conform to the traditional gender roles assigned by their society. These stereotyped roles are practiced for ages. Traditionally, historically and socially women are given weaker position in society. These gender stereotypes are transmitted generation after generation. Even in today's global world, women are deprived of their due rights and they are still being oppressed. Feminists and gender theorists are raising their voice to end discrimination against women. This paper is a study of a Pakistani female novelist, Qaisra Shehraz's novel, *The Holy Woman*, within the viewpoints of a few feminists and gender theorists. Gender stereotypes are challenged here and women emancipation is emphasized.

## 2. Literature Review

Literature truly depicts life and society to tell stories of the real world and the truths prevailing over there. Either a male or a female, a writer is free to imagine things and ideas, to create any story and portray its characters. The way characters are portrayed in a story, matters a lot in the sense that the traits associated with these characters become generalizations afterwards and these characters are then always be seen from that specified angle. The portrayal of a male character as a brave, courageous, bold, reserve, confident and rational being whereas of a female character as a weak, expressive, shy, submissive, emotional, and irrational being; sets mind for gender discrimination and division of human characteristics into two separate categories. In this way, a long list of binary oppositions emerges where one element is dominant over the other. The dominant factor is always associated with a male while the recessive one is referred to a female. Gender theorists challenge this binary opposition and the stereotyping of male and female in literature. Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist and a gender theorist, in her classic feminist text, *The Second Sex*, has pointed out myths about women and stereotyping of women in literature [1]. In her view, the concept of women as the Other has been practiced throughout history in the society and women have been treated as deviant, abnormal and as the second sex. She laments over the bitter fact that women have accepted the roles assigned to them by men and unknowingly they have given consent to this conception of their being taken as the Other.

A stereotype, in the words of Jennifer Gove and Stuart Watt, is a simplified and possibly exaggerated representation of the most common typical characteristics associated with a category. They also tell that these stereotypes are usually biased either positively or negatively [2]. In an article "Thinking About

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Gender”, Kay Deaux and Mary E. Kite, inform that although the term stereotype was used in the printing trade in the early part of the nineteenth century but this idea did not become part of the mainstream social scientific thought until Walter Lippmann’s treatise on public opinion in 1922; and the initial efforts of social scientists focused only on ethnic stereotypes and within a couple of decades the attention was also paid to identify the content of gender stereotypes [3].

In literature, gender stereotypes are more prevalent. Myths about male and female are constructed through the writings and these are then practiced repeatedly and continuously. In Hans Bertan’s view, feminist critics show that how often the literary representations of women repeat the familiar cultural stereotypes of a woman as an immoral and dangerous seductress, eternally dissatisfied, cute but essentially helpless, unworldly, self-sacrificing angel and so on [4]. D. Jill Savitt has narrated the facts about female stereotyping in literature; that is from the ‘Dick and Jane’ reading series to the classics, women have been held tightly to several role models as their guides while male characters have been free to take any role they like and women characters have been written to play and re-play the same limited themes [5]. Savitt further tells that in case of deviation of a female character from the norm - the unyielding stereotypes, more attention is called to the purity of what the female character is supposed to be. The impact of this stereotyping is also highlighted by Savitt who clarifies that the narrowness and confining nature of women’s stereotypes in literature is as nullifying as are the imagined strictures on her in real life; men are encouraged to become men in both novels and life whereas women are forced to rise above being a woman thus women strive to be more men-like and in turn are condemned when they take on male characteristics such as aggression, ambition and the like. About gender stereotyping in literature, Savitt says that in most primers, women are vividly depicted in tight places giving message of what women/men should and should not be, sacrifices and selflessness appear to be an integral part of a woman’s make-up, few qualities such as of passivity, incompetence, fearfulness, meekness and dependence are allotted to the girls while certain positive traits like resourcefulness, creativity and bravery are manifested much more in the boys. This stereotyping starts as early in our lives as the childhood stage where in fairytales, women take on weak and submissive roles; always trapped in some kind of trouble and men performing noble deeds of bravery, courage and solving problems. Likewise, Richard Allen in an article, “Literature, Gender, Feminist Criticism” refers to this gender stereotyping in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, where the sex of the hero-Pip and heroine-Stella seem significant and his/her development turns out to be a process involving gender [6].

Sarojini Nayak and Jeevan Nair, while discussing the issue of gender equality, explore the truths that the more advanced debate today is no longer confined to the status of women but has extended to the whole complex pattern of men’s and women’s social roles and in actuality, women in the West have achieved a high degree of legal and professional equality with men but the traditional concept of male and female roles still controls the actual behaviour in various sections of society [7].

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, points out that women take their role the way they are assigned to them by men. Similarly Jill Savitt has projected the idea that the sexist myths prevailing in society are perpetuated year after year and everything is accepted as it is without any questioning. Now the question arises whether these stereotypes can be challenged or not. In V. Geetha’s point of view, society is responsible for assigning roles to men and women hence stereotypes can be challenged by changing the content of media messages, by showing women in more enabling and empowering roles, by re-writing textbooks on the basis of gender equality, by reversing male and female roles and functions, by telling men about the limitation of masculine norms and by persuading government to reserve a certain number of posts for women in all its departments including legislative bodies [8].

Masculine and feminine norms are socially constructed and not determined by nature. Men always enjoy privileged positions and open choices so their vision is broad whereas women are kept unprivileged and circumscribed with no choices of their own so the perpetuation of this practice pushes back women from the leadership and authoritative positions. Tina Chanter asserts that women were only considered unsuited to the roles reserved for men because of lacking in education to become politically informed and responsible citizens and once they are given this opportunity, they were as good as men [9]. These references taken from the work of feminists and gender theorists: Beauvoir, Savitt, Geetha and Chanter; make it evident that gender stereotypes are mere social constructions and not determined by God so they can be challenged.

### 3. Methodology

The qualitative mode of research is adopted to analyse the text of the selected novel, *The Holy Woman*. Feminism and gender theory provided the theoretical ground for this research study. Theories of the feminists and the gender theorists help to critically analyse the text. Relevant examples from the novel are analyzed in the light of views presented by the theorists, the critics and the reviewers.

### 4. Textual Analysis of *The Holy Woman*

Qaisra Shahraz, a Pakistani woman novelist, is a feminist and writes about issues of women. Her novel, *The Holy Woman*, is a story of Zarri Bano and tells us how she was trapped in the hands of the patriarchal oppression and how she emerges as an independent woman at the end [10].

The notable major and minor male characters in this novel are: Sikander Din-the central male character, Habib Khan - Zarri Bano's father, Siraj Din - Habib's father, Ibrahim Musa - a man in Cairo and Khawer - a landlord.

Savitt views that men are given powerful roles and authoritative positions. Likewise Beauvoir says that women accept as it is the roles given to them by men. This novel shows evidence of this traditional gender biased roles of men and women. Habib Khan, a landlord, proves to be a traditional gender biased man who after the death of his only son, wants to sacrifice his daughter in the name of religion and decides a very cruel destiny for her to become a Holy Woman of his clan and inherit all his property, remaining unmarried throughout her life. He knows that Zarri Bano, a very good looking and well educated woman of 27 years, an active member of feminist movement who wants to establish her own publishing company in Karachi and also wants to marry Sikander, her lover - a handsome business tycoon from Karachi. Yet Habib Khan marries her off to the Holy Quran. His patriarchal thinking is presented in the novel where he declares that he is the head of the family and he will decide what is good for his Zarri Bano. Then he informs his wife that he has not liked Sikander although Shahzada, his wife has told him that Zarri Bano wants to marry him. Habib Khan's patriarchal approach also comes to the surface when he informs his wife about his decision that he is going to talk with his father, Siraj Din, about Zarri Bano's becoming a Shahzadi Ibadat: A Holy Woman. When Zarri Bano resists at his decision telling him that she has accepted Sikander's proposal and has decided to marry him, he then refuses to fulfill her desire and very harshly tells her that there will be no marriage ceremony for her as he will never grant permission to her to marry this man or any other man. Habib Khan's role is of a traditional gender biased man thus proving the concepts given by Savitt and Beauvoir.

Siraj Din, another male character, is the head of family and all matters are decided with his permission as in the case of Zarri Bano. Habib Khan's words are a proof of this patriarchal hold of Siraj Din, "Father, I need to talk to you. It's about Zarri Bano and our inheritance." (69) Thus Siraj Din also verifies the ideas presented by Beauvoir and Savitt.

According to Geetha, gender stereotypes can be challenged; hence men can deviate from their traditional roles as an authoritative, oppressing and gender-biased being. Literary texts can portray the changed gender roles as is done by Qaisra Shahraz in this novel where Sikander, the male protagonist takes untraditional role. Sikander's character is revealed through this example from the text where he becomes angry at the decision of making Zarri Bano a Holy Woman, he wants to stop her from sacrificing her life so he requests her not to take that cruel action and informs her that if she becomes a Holy Woman then they will have robbed her of her womanhood and individual freedom and she cannot sacrifice herself for the sake of her family's customs and traditions. When Zarri Bano gives no heed to his words, he again pleads her and asks her to think about her individuality and she as a person whose personal freedom is at stake. Then he puts questions to her, "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?" (126) Sikander's liberal, modern, changed and untraditional behaviour towards woman is also evident when he is going to marry Zarri Bano who has really become a Holy Woman, "All I can assure you now is that everything will be in your hands. I'll make no demands on you." (387) His conversations with his mother about Zarri Bano also reflect his unconventional role as a man, "She has already been oppressed and

exploited by her father and grandfather. I am not going to be another male oppressor in the guise of a husband. I will be a friend and companion to her” (388)

Khawer, although a feudal lord yet he is an educated and liberal man who wants to marry Firdous, the Deputy Headmistress of his school. Khawer plays a prominent role in the village management committee, overseeing and governing the school. His mother, Chaudharani Kaniz dislikes Firdous as she belongs to a lower status and caste. Khawer then defends her on the ground that she is a Deputy Headmistress of the school and not a washerwoman’s daughter.

Ibrahim Musa, like Sikander, loves Zarri Bano and wants to marry her. He helped Zarri Bano in learning classical Arabic and offered to spend some time with her every other day to supervise her study and to help her with her achievement of classical Arabic. Musa falls in love with Zarri Bano and proposes her but she refuses him as her father and grandfather have deprived her of her normal life as a woman married to a man. At this, Musa tries to convince her that she can marry as well as devote herself to religious studies and he can think of nothing better than having his wife sharing the same Department in the University, his home and life.

Sikander, Khawer and Musa, all these male characters of the novel under analysis, conform to Geetha’s perception that gender roles are social constructs and can be changed. Men can take untraditional roles of accommodating, unauthoritative and liberal beings.

Female characters in this novel include: Zarri Bano- the protagonist, Shahzada - Zarri Bano’s mother, Fatima - Firdous’s mother, Firdous - Deputy Headmistress of the village school, Ruby - Zarri Bano’s younger sister, Kaniz - Khawer’s mother, Sakina - another Holy Woman, and Naimat Bibi and Kulsoom - village women.

Chanter’s idea is that women lack opportunities to excel in life and get education but once they are given the chance they turn out to be as good as men. Zarri Bano, main character of this novel is an educated, modern and beautiful young woman of 27 years who has refused many proposals and when at last she accepts one proposal, of Sikander, her only brother - Jafar dies suddenly. She has to surrender then to the patriarchal hold over her of his grandfather and father, for the sake of family honour and pride. She was given choices at first and when the time of her settlement in life actually comes she got trapped in the hands of patriarchal oppression. Beauvoir says that women’s roles have been defined by men throughout history and women are being considered as the deviant, abnormal and the other accepting their traditional roles as shown by Zarri’s character who takes her role of the Holy Woman determined by her father. Before the death of her brother, she was given choices but as the situation changes after the death of her brother who has to inherit the property, she was deprived of her right of marriage in order to be a heir of her father’s property. Her emancipation before the tragic period of her life is evident from the example from the text, “This was their third meeting. Zarri Bano, especially invited to visit Sikander’s home, had accepted graciously.” (38) She resists at the cruel decision of her father to make her a Holy Woman and she raises her voice that she has decided to marry Sikander and she wants to marry him. At one point it is told, “Zarri Bano, the university campus woman, the feminist, fighting with the recluse” (176). In the role of a Holy Woman she is sent to the Al-Azhar – the oldest University in Cairo to get religious education and finally she becomes an independent woman, visiting other Muslim countries for religious and educational purposes, establishing a college for women. This is an evidence of Chanter’s idea that women can be as good as men if opportunities are provided to women. At the end, she is granted permission after spending years of life as a Holy Woman, to marry a man. She emerged as an emancipated woman at the end and gets married to Sikander. She leaves her new home the very next day of her marriage because of her tour of Indonesia and Malaysia. Sikander’s words spoken to his father reveal her emancipation, “You know, Father, Zarri Bano has a lot of commitments. She can’t just drop everything, now that she is married to me. One of those commitments is the women’s Jamaat-i-Muslimeen tour of Indonesia and Malaysia. Zarri Bano had made plans for this a long time ago, well before the wedding came along.” (439).

Shahzada’s disapproving attitude towards his husband, after Zarri Bano is forced to become a Holy Woman, has gradually changed Habib Khan who at last gives approval for Zarri Bano’s marriage to a man. One example from the text highlights it where Shahzada shows her annoyance to her husband, “So you are

going to wed your daughter to your fields and to her faith.” (67-68) Habib Khan’s resentment and feeling of loss at his wife’s behaviour are described, “I know that you have never forgiven me, Have you?” (287)

Fatima, Firdous, Naimat Bibi and Kulsoom are working and independent women. Kaniz lives alone with her only son Khawer and she has made choice of selecting her husband. Sakina and Ruby are passive and traditional in their approach.

Stereotypes, as viewed by Gove and Watt, not only shape the way we perceive other people but they also shape the way we behave, and people being active players in the development and construction of their own identities, can change themselves within limits to fit their understanding and views of gender. Gove and Watt define masculinity and femininity as often adopted gender-typical behaviour of people to form and fit with the identities they construct [2].

Whether a text is masculine or feminine depends upon the space given to male or female characters, respectively. The novel under analysis shows that the main character is a female - Zarri Bano and there are more female characters and their stories than there are male characters and their stories. So this novel is a representation of femininity. Ali Ahmed Kharal, in his article, “The Holy Woman: A Feminist Perspective” says that Qairsa Shahraz has successfully brought the female protagonists to the centre-stage and these female main characters serve as a means of consciousness-raising in the female segment of society [11]. Next, he asserts that in *The Holy Woman*, Qairsa Shahraz seeks to contribute to the process of change that has already started all over the world that is the reconsideration of women’s rights and status. He draws his conclusion that the female characters of this novel have a will and life of their own by cutting loose the constraints imposed by the gender discrimination thus Qairsa Shahraz wishes to build a world free of gender bias.

## 5. Conclusion

The text analysis of the novel, *The Holy Woman*, provides evidence of the changed gender roles and challenges the stereotypes of a male taking a variety of roles and a female just taking the limited roles; a male being confident, bold, brave, independent, rational, reserve, dominant and the like while a female being shy, submissive, emotional, obedient, and so on. Zarri and Shahzada show obedience and submissiveness at an early phase but later on they emerge as confident, authoritative, independent and dominant individuals. Sikander, Musa and Khawer openly express their feelings and emotions of love. Zarri on the other hand shows very reserve and cold behaviour. Finally, she becomes totally free to make her own choices and she is always busy in religious and educational activities, serving and educating the Muslim women of her society. Fatima and Naimat Bibi are other examples of the changed gender roles as they are working women and live independently.

Analysis of the male and the female characters in this novel has revealed that there is stereotyping of male and female characters and gender-biasedness as seen in the main characters of Siraj Din, Habib Khan, Zarri Bano and Shahzada. They all take the traditional roles at one point or the other yet they change in the course of events. There is also challenging of gender stereotypes when we look at Sikander, Musa and Khawer. They are all young people - modern, well-educated, liberal and unbiased whereas Siraj Din and Habib Khan are older people having their gender-biases and conservative attitude but not to the full extent as they have provided Zarri Bano some kind of freedom to get University level education while staying away from home. Thus this novel reveals the fact that change is taking place in society as a result of globalization, education and awareness.

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