

Exploring Gender Violence, Patriarchy, and Women's Struggles in Fatima Bhutto's novel "The Shadow of the Crescent Moon"



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Abstract: *This article explores the literature of Fatima Bhutto, focusing on her 2015 novel "The Shadow of the Crescent Moon." It delves into the various factors that contribute to the widespread occurrence of violence against women in Pakistan, as depicted in her contemporary works. The analysis aims to examine the correlation between direct, structural, and societal mistreatment in Bhutto's work. The novel is particularly appropriate for this research because it delves into Pakistani individuals' experiences during wartime, political upheaval, and societal hegemony.*

Bhutto's work is particularly relevant because it delves into Pakistani individuals' experiences during wartime, political upheaval, and societal hegemony. The novel achieves this by portraying the occurrence of violence at several levels, such as individual, community, and societal, and examining how overlapping identities impact women's experiences with violence. The story delves into the complex and diverse aspects of violence through the examination of female characters like Mina and Samarra. It encompasses more than just physical abuse, extending to psychological suffering, societal prejudice, and political manipulation. Moreover, the underlying and detrimental attributes of cultural and physical violence set a norm and justify explicit violence, such as physical abuse and sexual assault, which profoundly impact the experiences of female protagonists.

Keywords: Fatima Bhutto, gender violence, cultural norms, women's fights, patriarchy, women's rights

Introduction

Since 9/11, the issue of violence against women has become a significant aspect of Pakistani writing in English. Prior research on the nation's literary works has primarily concentrated on depictions of domestic violence as the predominant manifestation of women's human rights violations. However, scholars often overlook the vulnerability of women in Pakistan to various forms of gender-based violence at different levels, such as micro, meso, and macro. Recent ethnographic research reveals that women in Pakistan encounter ongoing risks to

their safety, health, and overall welfare as a result of cultural and religious influences at the intermediate level, as well as systemic violence at the larger societal level.

This study contends that Fatima Bhutto's novel, "The Shadow of the Crescent Moon," presents a subtle and intricate depiction of the various levels and intricacy of violence targeting women in present-day Pakistan. The narrative unfolds from several viewpoints on a particular morning, exposing the intricate and sorrowful truths of these folks' existence as they grapple with issues of selfhood, belief, and fairness in a tumultuous

world. The novel explores how patriarchal systems and cultural standards contribute to the perpetuation of violence against women and highlights the emergence of resistance from unexpected sources through the experiences of its protagonists.

Johan Galtung's theoretical framework on violence, encompassing works from 1969 and 1990, provides a valuable perspective for analysing Bhutto's novel, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. Galtung argues that direct, cultural, and structural violence are interconnected and mutually strengthening, as direct violence reinforces structural violence, whereas cultural violence is frequently employed to explain both kinds. This study aims to analyse the portrayal of gender-based violence in Pakistan in the novel using Galtung's framework, exploring how various factors, such as patriarchal norms, cultural and societal norms, religious beliefs, political ideology, and individual standards, contribute to the portrayal of gender-based violence (Galtung and Fischer 2013).

In recent years, Pakistani literature has increasingly focused on depicting violence against women as a prominent theme. Female authors from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh have specifically depicted the everyday realities of gender-based violence in these countries, aiming to bring attention to the cultural norms and patriarchal standards that perpetuate such violence. However, ethnographic research reveals that violence against women in Pakistan goes beyond physical harm and encompasses a wide range of abuse, including sexual assault at a larger scale, neglect, discrimination, gender inequality, verbal attacks, threats, harassment, and different forms of coercion with the intention of overpowering or controlling women. Existing studies on literary portrayals of violence against women in Pakistan have provided valuable insights into the various forms of abuse experienced by women, including rape, sexual harassment, beatings, and physical torture.

The current corpus of analysis on Bhutto's novel, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013), lacks a similar essential element. Lamichhane (2017)

and Zaidi, Sahibzada, and Farooq (2022) accurately note that Bhutto raises inquiries over the violence carried out by government officials and militants who possess absolute power in the area. The novel portrays several forms of violence against women, including political instability, police corruption, unequal schooling prospects, and patriarchal oppression. Anam, Lodhi, and Anwer (2021) assert that Bhutto is a skilled writer of political fiction who skillfully crafts an exceptional narrative in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, exploring themes of war, treachery, political turmoil, and the erosion of identity (Anam, Anwer, 2021).

However, scholarly analysis of Bhutto's novel primarily centres on explicit acts of violence rather than exploring other aspects of violence. Therefore, it is imperative to broaden our comprehension of violence against women in Bhutto's novel to encompass not only physical and sexual mistreatment but also additional manifestations such as social marginalisation, cultural bias, political manipulation, and psychological manipulation, which occur at intermediate and large scales. In order to achieve this objective, the study uses Johan Galtung's conceptualization of violence as its theoretical foundation.

Typology of Violence in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*

In the novel *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, Bhutto employs Galtung's framework to examine the complex types of violence encountered by female characters. These acts of violence serve to uphold patriarchal norms and systematic prejudice. Galtung's typology of violence divides the analysis into three distinct sub-sections: direct, structural, and cultural violence.

Direct violence is defined as explicit acts of aggression that cause physical harm or injury to a particular individual or group, including actions like murder, sexual assault, and discriminatory behavior. It infringes upon essential human needs such as survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. Structural violence is a discreet and systematic form of harm that arises from unequal power dynamics and is

evident in "social injustice" such as poverty and marginalization. The phenomenon acts by perpetuating deeply rooted political, economic, and social disparities, impeding equitable access to opportunities.

Cultural violence refers to any aspect of a culture that serves as a justification for violence, whether explicit or implicit. It functions by leveraging several cultural domains, such as religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, and logical/formal science, to provide justification for acts of aggression or oppression. All three notions of violence are closely interconnected and visible at various levels, such as micro, meso, and macro (Parsons 2007; Vorobej 2008).

Direct Violence and Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms

Bhutto's novel depicts a pervasive prevalence of direct violence, particularly targeting women, through various manifestations such as physical mistreatment, war-related tragedies, and instances of sexual assault. The story emphasises the physical mistreatment of women and children by those in positions of power in Pakistan, where the state's cruelty is unparalleled. The violence that occurs can manifest in both subtle and obvious ways, ranging from little acts of aggression like pinching or squeezing to more serious forms that gradually have a profound impact on the victims' physical and mental health.

The narrative goes beyond just depicting violent acts by employing a variety of literary strategies to generate deep emotions and provoke reflections about society. The novel explicitly displays physical aggression through female characters like Samarra and Mina, aiming to undermine the fundamental needs of others. Physical harm, including beatings and sexual assault, repeatedly befalls these characters. Bhutto uses these characters' metaphors, imagery, and similes to represent the terrible influence of violence and offer insight into their inner beings, fostering a profound sense of empathy among readers towards their predicament.

A group of men, including a military man on the

verge of retirement known as the "boss," brutally mistreat Samarra. The use of symbolism enhances the storyline, reflecting societal frameworks and cultural standards that contribute to acts of violence. The dialogues and linguistic choices employed in this interaction expose the hidden power dynamics and societal conflicts, illuminating the characters' motivations and socio-cultural influences.

Mina also experiences the same aggressiveness, adding to the already distressing narrative of direct assault. An emaciated Talib forcefully pushes Mina while brandishing a weapon, and he issues a menacing warning to end her life if she persists with her claims. Talib employs direct violence to instill terror, often through repeated instances of physical abuse and sexual assault. This violence is strategic and instrumental, as described by Kalyvas (2012, 659).

Sexual violence is a prevalent issue in Pakistan, with perpetrators often avoiding punishment, suggesting the government's inability to enforce laws. In "In the Shadow of the Crescent Moon," military personnel commit instances of sexual assault, which constitutes community violence because the perpetrators have no familial connection to the victims. Sexual coercion refers to the use of nonphysical methods to force women into engaging in sexual activity. Due to the belief that the perpetrators will not face legal consequences, many crimes remain unreported or dismissed. Perpetrators often evade accountability by shifting blame onto women for the incidents that occur to them.

The story also explores the psychological consequences of direct violence on women and other vulnerable individuals. While women may not directly participate in the Mir Ali insurgent movement, the battle has a significant impact on their mental well-being. The portrayal of political turmoil's effect on communities and families is highly destructive, particularly in relation to fundamental human necessities such as security, affection, and social connection. Women who experience direct violence endure the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety (Bhutto, 2013).

Both Samarra and Mina in the novel endure the tragic deaths of their families as a result of state-sanctioned violence. Samarra shares a profound connection with her father, Ghazan Afridi, but the ambiguity surrounding Pakistan's political status compels them to part ways. Ghazan Afridi leaves Samarra, leaving behind his mother, as he deems her presence unsuitable due to her femininity and perceives it as a potential risk. War-related disasters, such as displacement, cause enduring emotional anguish and distress in Samarra. The text's symbolism of separation and displacement functions as a mirror of society's hierarchies and power relations, revealing the underlying themes and contextual consequences of violent actions.

Mina, who previously worked at the hospital, experiences a tragic event when she is deeply grieving the loss of her child. Her behavioral changes stem directly from political turmoil and exemplify latent aggression, in which actions have consequences that extend beyond the immediate participants. These activities, influenced by her distressing experiences, emphasise the interconnected references to historical and sociopolitical circumstances.

Samarra's melancholic emotions cause her to adopt a state of misery and rebellion. Driven by anger and a desire for retaliation, she engages in public smoking and dedicates herself to the independence movement, which ultimately causes her immense suffering. Similarly, Mina has transformed into an emotionally unstable lady who fearlessly expresses her anger by physically attacking and scratching the breast of a Taliban commander. These instances demonstrate that unfulfilled demands resulting from direct acts of violence have significant emotional impacts on individuals and their families, resulting in sentiments of sorrow, rage, and hopelessness expressed in various ways.

Bhutto enhances the portrayal of Mina and sheds light on the overarching themes of sorrow, bereavement, and the human reaction to aggression through the use of intertextual references and literary influences. This exhibition highlights the enduring impact of violence on individuals' identities and actions, even decades after the initial traumatic event.

The concept of structural violence

The novel "In the Shadow of the Crescent Moon" explores the concept of structural violence as a mechanism that restricts the rights and opportunities of women, particularly women like Samarra. When institutions, organizational structures, or groups within a state implement a system, policy, or norm that denies an individual political, legal, or economic benefit, it results in structural violence, a hidden form of abuse. The novel highlights notable instances of injustice, such as gender-based discrimination in school and politics, as well as the curtailment of freedom of speech.

The limitation on women's education in Pakistan is a manifestation of systemic violence that undermines gender parity and perpetuates social inequities. Ethnographic research on violence against women in Pakistan has identified the socially accepted belief that women should have a passive, submissive, and obedient position within the house as a contributing cause. People view failure to meet this expectation as a reason for punishment, potentially involving various forms of violence (Karmaliani et al., 2012). Bhutto's novel's opening chapter highlights this issue by collectively deciding that Samarra should only receive education up to the tenth grade. The depiction of Samarra engaging in independent study using books and self-directed learning methods serves as a representation of women's tenacity in the midst of persecution, emphasising their unwavering resolve to overcome societal obstacles.

The novel demonstrates that the issue of inequality extends beyond educational institutions, encompassing the realms of politics and freedom of expression. Societal standards prevent women like Samarra and professionals like doctors, secretaries, and consultants from engaging in politics. Bhutto uses irony and sarcasm to critique the false conventions of a patriarchal culture, as demonstrated by the depiction of these cases. The characters' ambitions clearly contrast with society's expectations, displaying irony, while the depiction of the absurdity of societal conventions governing women's duties demonstrates satire. According to scholars,

education is the main pathway for women to attain empowerment, but the existence of violence greatly hampers their capacity to do so.

Bhutto's portrayal of Pakistani culture reveals that the presence of inequality intensifies this problem, as women who endeavour to resist the oppressive system encounter severe punishment. Bhutto adeptly employs foreshadowing to generate tension and expectation when Samarra joins the Mir Ali insurgent movement to oppose oppression. The prefiguration of Samarra's participation in the Mir Ali rebel movement suggests the difficulties she will encounter as a result of challenging conventional conventions. As a result, her involvement exposes her to torture by military forces because she possesses knowledge she shouldn't have (Bhutto, 2013). The incident demonstrates the frequent limitations placed on women's involvement in political arenas, as well as the denial of their rights to express themselves freely as citizens. These instances also underline how hidden aggression affects other women's perceptions of their ability to gain power.

Bhutto's work views the restriction on women's freedom of expression as a manifestation of structural violence. The freedom to express oneself is essential for empowering women, enabling them to communicate their perspectives on topics such as bodily autonomy and individual rights. However, in Mir Ali, people label women who voice their opinions as "rebels" or "baghi," and those who rebel face severe retribution.

The cases of Samarra and Mina illustrate that restricting women's ability to express themselves is a type of structural violence that sustains gender inequality by suppressing their voices and depriving them of control over their own lives. Galtung's idea, "violence begets violence," strongly connects this situation, suggesting that depriving people of their fundamental needs increases their likelihood of resorting to direct violence as a form of revenge.

Cultural Violence: Justifying and Perpetuating Oppression

Galtung (1990) describes cultural violence as the use of various cultural elements such as

religion, ideology, language, art, logic, or mathematics to justify and legitimise acts of violence against specific populations. The Shadow of the Crescent Moon portrays a form of violence that is characterised by two main issues: religious doctrine and the prevalence of rape culture among the oppressors. The novel portrays the experiences of women who, due to their differing ideas or ideologies from the oppressors, such as the Taliban or other militia organisations, endure torture and violations inflicted by community violence.

The state enacts two types of cultural violence within the novel: it limits individuals' autonomy in selecting their religious convictions and fosters a culture that normalises sexual assault through its institutions. The army's pervasive and ever-present presence in Mir Ali achieves the former through continuous surveillance and regulation. Galtung's concept of cultural violence, which refers to the concealment and acceptance of violent acts as normal, aligns with the metaphor of a strong military force, symbolising society's inability to recognise and acknowledge violence.

Conclusion

The novel demonstrates the violation of human rights and the promotion of intolerance towards minority groups in Mir Ali due to the state's imposition of restrictions on religious freedom, as depicted through the experiences of Mina and Samarra. The military's pervasive presence in Mir Ali exemplifies the state's control and suppression of women's voices.

In conclusion, The Shadow of the Crescent Moon emphasises the significance of cultural violence in perpetuating gender inequality and human rights violations. In Mir Ali, the state's actions contribute to the perpetuation of violence and marginalization of minority groups, highlighting the need for greater awareness and action against these forms of violence.

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