

Negotiating Womanhood in Shazaf Fatima Haider's *How It Happened*: A Beauvoirian Approach



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Abstract: *This paper analyzes How It Happened (2012) by Shazaf Fatima Haider, applying Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory to expose the cultural forces that confine and define womanhood. It examines how patriarchal structures in Pakistani society shape women's lives. This study highlights marriage as a key site of control. Family traditions often commodify women and silence their voices. The character Dadi enforces strict norms like arranged marriages. She represents the internalization of patriarchal values. Younger characters like Zeba resist these constraints. Her rebellion highlights the conflict between tradition and personal choice. Saleha, the narrator, shows the process of becoming a woman under societal pressure. She internalizes expectations that limit her. This paper argues that novel reveals the women's suffering caused by the constructed social norms. This paper establishes that societies make the traditions and norms that eventually paves the path of patriarchal oppression.*

Keywords: Womanhood, Marriage, Patriarchal Values, Oppression, Rebellion

Introduction

Shazaf Fatima Haider's novel, *How It Happened*, offers a critical analysis of the enduring power of patriarchal structures in contemporary Pakistani society. This research paper employs the foundational feminist theory developed by Simone de Beauvoir in her work, *The Second Sex* (1997), to undertake a close reading of Haider's novel. Beauvoir's argument that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman provides the primary theoretical basis for this study. Within patriarchal structures, as Beauvoir says, these processes systematically generate women as "the second sex," fulfilling roles marked by passivity, objectification, and circumscribed agency in contrast to men, who have broader options and more decision-making authority. Haider's novel is a rich literary case study, starkly bringing to life how these processes work within a bounded cultural frame. The novel criticizes arranged marriage as the

vehicle of patriarchal domination. Arranged marriages, rooted in tradition and commonly considered as the proper Islamic way or preferable for family honor and respectability. Figures like Dadi, personify the enforcement of those cultural norms. Dadi personally steps in to arrange marriage prospects, particularly for her grandson Haroon, with strict criteria that express patriarchal values of predilection for male lineal descent, social standing, and female subordination over individual will. The novel skillfully charts the matchmaking process, with the commodification of women, silencing of their voices, and stripping of decision-making authority away from the women themselves to family elders, typically male or female figures upholding the patriarchal order. But the novel *How It Happened* is more than a simple report of oppression. It can depict the negotiations and resistances of young women characters as they navigate through these constraints. The rebellion

of the protagonist, opposes the unyielding grip of traditional authority. In contrast, the younger narrator, Saleha, is a case of the internalization of process theorized by Beauvoir. Observing the difficulties of matchmaking and confronting new restrictions as she enters young womanhood. She initially resolves that arranged marriage is the sole noble option for women as the societal expectations are internalized in her. Her hidden romantic ambitions and their resultant repression further illustrate the mechanisms of shame, restriction, and fear employed to manage female desire and preserve conformity. Through the figure of the widowed, liberal Fatima Phupo, the novel indicates the possibility of gradual, hard-won reform within the patriarchal structure. Through application of Beauvoir's theoretical model, this paper argues that Haider's *How It Happened* is an important literary investigation of the social construction of womanhood in the Pakistani patriarchal context. It especially draws attention to the manner in which marriage is a significant site of control, conflict, and potential negotiation.

Literature Review

Shazaf Fatima Haider's *How It Happened* has been studied from various critical perspectives, all of which highlight the novel's rich engagement with gender, identity, tradition, and postcolonial concerns in Pakistani society. Sami et al. (2025) interpret the novel through a postcolonial feminist lens, arguing that it critiques gender discrimination and rigid social expectations. The novel challenges the binary labels attached to women, such as the "good" versus the "rebellious" woman, especially through characters like Dadi who uphold patriarchal structures. Haider exposes how women are objectified during matchmaking and how beauty standards, such as the preference for fair skin, are influenced by colonial legacies. The satire used in the novel becomes a tool to critique institutional and cultural oppression, ultimately calling for women's autonomy. Similarly, Akhter et al. (2025) examine the novel through Freud's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on how characters experience repression and generational trauma. Dadi represents the superego, enforcing societal

norms, while Zeba symbolizes the id, expressing individual desires. Their conflict illustrates the psychological struggle between traditional expectations and personal freedom, especially for women, and reveals how suppressed emotions often resurface as rebellion against patriarchal systems. Another important postcolonial reading is offered by Ansar and Bo (2025), who apply Frantz Fanon's idea of *Manichaeism* to show how the novel critiques colonial binaries like Western versus non-Western. Dadi's resistance to cultural assimilation, as seen in her objection to her son marrying a white woman, is contrasted with Zeba's rejection of marriage and traditional gender roles. Characters like Alam, who idealize the West, reflect how colonial power structures persist through postcolonial elites. The novel thus works as a decolonial narrative by validating indigenous identities and rejecting externally imposed dualities. In a related study, Parveen, Shaheen, and Qamar (2024) compare Haider's novel with Naqvi's of *Abdullah the Cossack* using the theories of Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. They find that while Naqvi's work may reflect Western stereotypes about Eastern chaos, Haider's narrative resists such portrayals by celebrating local culture and traditions. This contrast highlights the role of literature in either reinforcing or challenging Orientalist views. Meanwhile, Qamar and Shaheen (2024) analyze Haider's novel through Simone de Beauvoir's feminist ideas, focusing on themes of intersectional love and generational tension over marriage practices. The study shows how the younger generation gradually pushes for change, promoting love-based marriages over arranged ones, while still showing respect for their elders. The novel humorously critiques rigid norms and demonstrates how traditional families can adapt to evolving gender roles. Mushtaq et al. (2024) also explore generational conflict but through Stuart Hall's cultural theory. They highlight the tension between tradition and modernity through the characters of Dadi and Zeba. By applying Hall's concept of third space, they show how characters navigate cultural hybridity, balancing religious rigidity and modern values. The study concludes that the novel critiques inflexible traditions but also imagines the possibility of

reconciliation in changing societies. Adding a postmodern perspective, Zahid, Mujahid, and Hussain (2023) use Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory to explore how the novel questions dominant cultural narratives. Through characters like Zeba and Fati Phupho, Haider foregrounds personal freedom and rejects grand, traditional narratives about gender, marriage, and religion. The novel promotes localized, personal stories that allow women to challenge societal norms. Batool et al. (2022) focus on linguistic strategies, particularly code-switching, and analyze how Haider uses Urdu-English blends and literary techniques like echo words to depict cultural identity and generational conflict. These language choices reflect the characters' efforts to navigate between tradition and modernity, and show how bilingualism is used to portray authentic social experiences. Similarly, Ishfaq et al. (2022) explore generational conflict using Giddens' modernity theory and Mannheim's sociology of generations. They argue that Dadi's strict adherence to arranged marriage customs clashes with the younger generation's desire for personal choice. The novel critiques this rigidity and shows how it disrupts family harmony. Akram (2022) looks at religious divisions, particularly Shia-Sunni dynamics, using Schleicher's cultural-textual model. The study shows that sectarian prejudice often dictates marital decisions, with elders enforcing intra-sect unions while youth resist these pressures. The novel critiques such rigid sectarianism and promotes values that align with broader Islamic teachings about unity and tolerance. Majeed et al. (2021) offer another postmodern interpretation, analyzing how Haider uses irony and nostalgia to critique outdated family traditions. Dadi represents a nostalgic view of the past that contradicts the evolving values of the younger generation. The novel uses irony to expose these contradictions and suggests that cultural roots may still influence individuals, even when they claim to reject them. This tension reveals the complexity of identity in a changing society. Finally, Tabassum et al. (2021) also apply Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory to show how the novel critiques the cultural oppression of women through forced

marriages, objectification, and economic dependency. The study highlights how Haider uses satire to expose practices that reduce women to mere commodities, stressing the need to dismantle gendered hierarchies. Akram and Zaheer (2017) examine the novel's intertextuality using the theories of Barthes and Kristeva. They find that the references to pop culture, religion, literature, and history enhance the narrative by adding depth and humor. These intertextual elements enrich the novel's portrayal of Pakistani society, showing how cultural meaning is constructed through overlapping texts and traditions. Overall, the scholarly discourse surrounding *How It Happened* confirms its value as a critique of social, cultural, and psychological issues in postcolonial Pakistan, but these studies do not explicitly discuss the sufferings of women due to the socially constructed norms. This study is being conducted to fill this gap.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses Simone de Beauvoir's ideas of *The Second Sex* (1997). Haider's account is approached through Beauvoir's feminist ideology, specifically about the roles that are assigned to women in patriarchal societies. In *The Second Sex* (1997), Beauvoir presents an in-depth critique of the effect of cultural systems on the lives of women from an extremely early age. Beauvoir argues that the negotiation process of maturation, gender role negotiation, experiences of objectification, marriage, and childbirth all contribute to the construction of women as "the second sex." Beauvoir dismisses the prevailing understanding of woman as an essentialist or biologically determined condition, and instead argues that: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, economic fate determines the figures that human females present in society" (p. 295). Additionally, she establishes that such identity is socially constructed, and argues that "it is the civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (p. 295). The use of the term "creature" is used to highlight the way in which women are pressured into roles that position them within an economy of masculinity and indeterminate identity. Beauvoir points to the idea that females

are taught to accept the roles assigned to them by society. In her opinion, a girl "agrees to submit unresistingly to a destiny that is going to be imposed upon her" (p. 325). Boys, in contrast, are supposed to have unlimited possibilities and "they are brought up to expect independent and adventurous lives" (p. 325). In patriarchal societies, the right to make decisions lies with men, while women are convinced to follow a certain track: "she will be wife, mother, grandmother, she is twelve years old, and already her story is written in the heavens" (p. 325). Beauvoir disagrees with such an approach, showing how social norms limit a woman's role by limiting her future as a bride and a mother: "for the girl marriage and motherhood involve her entire destiny" (p. 326). Beauvoir explores further the phenomenon of the female body being subject to society's critical judgment, especially after puberty. She accounts for how a young girl is unable to separate her bodily self from society's judgment because "this flesh becomes an object that others see and pay attention to" (p. 333). Men's gaze imposes pressure and fear, and therefore she is limited in her freedom. Passersby, mostly men, feel they have the right to pass judgment and criticize her appearance: "on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy" (p. 333). Based on Beauvoir's ideology that "love marriages are preferable to arranged marriages" (p. 421), a perspective described in the account given by Haider. Based on this account, the younger generation makes marriages on the basis of emotional relationships, compared to the older generation that practiced mostly arranged marriages as the tradition. Commonly patriarchal leaders resist the decisions of the younger generation at first, they eventually agree after they are unable to prevent such decisions. Beauvoir supports women in pursuing their career endeavors. Despite the prevailing conventional social beliefs that discourage working women on one hand, and on the other hand, endorse the notion of not supporting love marriages, the novel discusses the gradual acceptance as evident through its presentation of societal trends. Although the novel *How It Happened* portrays women who appear to be independent in their personal decisions in

contemporary society, it simultaneously presents the reality that complete control over the choice of partner and the establishment of relationships has not yet been attained. The remnants of patriarchal domination are still present, but in a subtle manner. Even characters such as Dadi unknowingly perpetuate such strong power systems. This paper attempts to analyze Haider's *How It Happened* to explore the sufferings of women due to the constructed social norms and ideologies.

Analysis

Haider's *How It Happened* can be considered as light and witty family novel. It is about arranged marriages for families who had migrated from India to Pakistan and retained their cultural heritage as a matter of pride and legacy. The story takes place in Karachi in a joint family. The narrator introduces the grandmother, Dadi (Gul Bahar Begum), as a very strong-willed lady with firm rules. Dadi resides with her son Hussain, his wife, and their three children. Dadi's character, from appearance to personality, is well established. As the head of the family, Dadi makes all the arrangements for choosing husbands for her grandchildren. The story is connected to Bhakuraj, a fictional place in India, and the Bandian family who moved to Karachi after India was divided. Haider opted for the fictional Bhakuraj because people in Pakistan after partition are highly sensitive about their land of origin and heritage; this option spares feelings. The author adopts a conversational and descriptive approach to the story, and Saleha is the narrator. The novel begins with a marriage and ends with a marriage. Haider keeps the story on the issue of family and matchmaking and does not take notice of the surrounding political scenario. We learn about Dadi from the beginning with her own marriage to Dada. Dadi was a pretty lady in her time whose three earlier engagements were cancelled; she waited impatiently for a suitor. Dadi believed her marriage delay was due to the evil eye. Although not fair-skinned, Dadi had sharp features unlike other local girls who were fair but did not have these features and a wasp waist. Dadi tells her grandchildren about meeting Dada, as he appeared on a black horse,

she fainted (or faked fainted), he saved her, and then proposed for her father's hand in marriage. Her father considered it and agreed. Dadi tells her grandchildren about this incident naturally and vividly. She frequently compares her courtship and marriage to the present in the book. Dadi informs her grandchildren that in India, burning spices ward off evil spirits. Smell is important pungent smell means no evil eye; no smell is an evil eye. Dadi performs this ritual every week (p. 5). Dadi disapproves of love marriages very much, saying arranged marriages are the only proper Islamic way. Dadi argues about arranged marriages incessantly with her daughters and grandchildren. If someone favors love marriage, Dadi objects and explains stories of failed love marriages in family history. Saleha informs readers Dadi and Dada had six daughters and three sons, evidence of love in their marriage. All six daughters—Sakina, Fatima, Zainab, Rania, Haseena, and Malika had arranged marriages. Two sons, Abbas and Fareed, died mysteriously, leaving only Hussain (Saleha's father). Dadi remembers Fareed died "because of love"(p.32) after he left to seek a girl to love and not return. In fact, he died during the East Pakistan war. Dadi believes his death was because he desired a love marriage. Saleha briefly reports about her father Hussain's family, then about her own: Hussain has three children, Haroon (eldest), Zeba, and Saleha. Haroon is Dadi's favorite. Dadi wishes to arrange his marriage meticulously, finding an ideal wife. She keeps all Haroon's childhood photographs. When Haroon graduates and also wishes to study abroad, Dadi fears that he will marry a white girl and eat haram food. Haroon receives a scholarship to the USA. He informs Dadi that he will return and marry a good Shia Syed girl from a good Urdu-speaking family. Dadi cautions Haroon about American women pursuing Pakistani men. Haroon returns safe after two years. When he secures a good job in Karachi, Dadi begins hunting for girls. In her view the girl "must be completely female, not lesbian, Shia Syed, virgin, from a good family, educated, and shorter than Haroon. She must also be tall, fair, thin, long hair, well-dressed, and blend modernity with modesty (p. 32-33). These views explain the constructed social

values for healthy marriages.

Dadi and the family hunt for Haroon's wife, meeting some girls. These encounters are realistically depicted with natural dialogue. Some girls are rejected by Dadi herself, some by Dadi and Haroon together. Haroon, the hero, finds all this disgusting. He detests meeting new people and being silly. Finally, Haroon finds a girl by himself, Saima, and informs his family. This raises questions, so Haroon keeps his cool because Saima is Shia Syed. Dadi is nervous because earlier love marriages in the family ended in disaster. But Haroon reassures Dadi, that she loves him. He also informs Dadi that he will not marry Saima if she does not like her, making Dadi feel special. Dadi says okay and visits Saima's family. Saima's family receives them warmly. Their traditional ways impress Dadi, meeting expectations. Dadi approves of Saima and her parents, further solidifying the decision. A week later, Saima's mother agrees to the proposal, bringing sweets and fruit. Saima's mother says, "In accepting your proposal I am handing over the dearest person in my world to you. Please give her respect and love and I assure you she will return all that you give her ten times more" (p. 70). Dadi says Saima can't cook or sew well, but Haroon's mother says the times have changed, even her own daughters can't cook or sew, so Saima can't be blamed. She reminds Dadi her own daughter Fatima couldn't cook or sew either, and Dadi's gripes cease. Saleha mentions Fatima (called "Fati") briefly, Dadi's widowed daughter with no children. Fatima has a cook and works for a magazine. After her husband's death, she chose to live, not mourn. She wears bright colours like red saris and tells relatives not to send condolence but let her be happy. Haider portrays Fatima as modern and rebellious in the strict Shia family. She wants freedom from patriarchy, so the family lets her live alone. As her philosophy of living is being a challenge to the constructed social norms and values. She writes powerful articles on women's emancipation and gays. Dadi criticizes her bluntness in front of grandchildren. Haroon's wedding involves distant relatives and friends. Excitedly, Dadi calls her cousin, Qurat Dadi, using the speakerphone so everyone can

hear. Dadi announces Haroon's marriage proudly. After a pause, Qurat Dadi shows excitement, then says her own granddaughter Naureen is to be married soon as they will "say yes tomorrow" (p. 78). This scene shows the characters' little pleasures. The older women control courtship firmly. Dadi's speakerphone call shows her authoritative role as the marriage decision-maker for family weddings and simultaneously shows her complex of holding power in patriarchal society. Dadi proudly describes it as an arranged marriage, as it wasn't, because love marriages are frowned upon. Beauvoir (1953) opposes arranged marriages, stressing freedom of choice (p. 421). However, love marriages are frowned upon in Pakistani society and marrying outside one's sect is considered a taboo. Haroon and Saima want a simple wedding, but both families insist on traditional ceremonies. They consult a "Jantri" (a Shia annual guide) for good dates. They have joint Mehndi, Barat, and Valima ceremonies. Marriage time witnesses Dadi and Haroon's mother having minor squabbles but ending in cheer. Dadi does not approve of colour choice by youngsters. Three of Dadi's daughters are present and other three cannot because of their family business. Rania comes from India with her outspoken daughters, Maw and Robs, who talk freely of taboo topics. Dadi does not approve of their dressing. Zainab comes from Canada with her sons, Mansoor and Alam. Haseena sends her son Hassan. Modern Fatima comes in her style. On the day of the wedding, Dadi attempts to match Zeba but fails. Zainab recommends Zeba for her son Alam Bhai. Alam troubles Zeba incessantly like a fly, which annoys Zeba. Zeba, a student of literature, does not appreciate such possessiveness. Alam's strategy fails. Alam attempts to entice Zeba with the accounts of Canadian life, but Zeba does not budge and spurns him in a blunt manner. Alam's strategy of winning Zeba over by Canadian life and disdain is against arranged marriages; he wishes to marry her because his mother desires it. Dadi then fixes her eyes on finding Zeba a match. She busily inflates Zeba's domesticity, and cooking, which Zeba is not used to. Dadi's attempts at finding Zeba a match is likened to a goat-seller before Eid. A few women offer

themselves for Zeba, giving her hope anew. Saima enters Haroon's house with respect. The cousins find wedding night fascinating and make bashful comments that embarrass Saleha and Zeba, as such things are forbidden.

Haider describes post-marriage life in Haroon's house as bride's aspirations and adaption. Haroon is scolded by his sisters for spending time with Saima and not with them. Everyone wishes for time with their spouse after marriage, which is difficult for the matriarchs to accept. Even Haroon indulges in Saima's cooking evokes negative responses. Secret politics against Saima begins in the house. Fearing so, Saima spends more time with her mother-in-law and Dadi, seeking her mother-in-law's protection. She loves Dadi's old family photographs. This attitude calms their attitude. Zeba, a student of English literature, notices this and perceives human relationships. She informs Dadi and her mother: "If you two don't loosen your grip you're going to lose not just your daughter-in-law but your son as well" (p. 138). They are annoyed but rational. Then a phone call about a proposal for Zeba begins a new chapter. This call makes the family alter their conduct, unlike Haroon's time. Haider explains how a girl's mother should behave during matchmaking passive, reserved, quiet, and respectful, answering only questions asked. Zeba's courtship starts. The first proposal is Mrs. Haq's son from America for two weeks. Mrs. Haq informs Zeba's mother that they want to get the marriage arranged for this short visit. Zeba's mother disapproves of her tone, but Dadi, the girl's side now, teaches modesty. They are having a hard time arranging everything so fast. Dadi explains how, in Bhakuraj, suitors gazed at her reflection in a mirror. She did not sit facing them straight on. Dadi states a woman's job is to hold her children and feed her husband. Zeba inquires if women also capable of pleasure. Dadi protests vociferously, "what is this pleasure-shleazure business?" (p. 144). Dadi states pleasure is useless; women need to get duties accomplished silently and patiently. She then speaks of Bhakuraj and instructs Zeba enter supported by her sister like an Eastern girl, wear light pink full-sleeved shalwar kameez (no red

or black), be shy, serve tea, never talk of politics or literature. Dadi states that "Good Eastern Girls should never have strong opinions of their own, but only those of their husbands or in-laws" (p. 146). Zeba does the opposite; she wears red lipstick and black sleeveless suit and does not attend to the guests. A series of proposals follows, all going wrong. Zeba gets tired of this. Saleha concludes that "Zeba Baji's matrimonial affairs had me preoccupied with the whole business of marriage. I was more certain than ever that arranged marriages were the only route available to decent, respectable girls. Still, it seemed quite upsetting that a drawing room was the only court of romance available" (p. 152). Saleha the narrator, turning sixteen and being confronted with new restrictions, such as being banned from a boy's birthday party. She knows she is a grown-up. She reads romance stories secretly from her mother's cupboard. Beauvoir (1953) says that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 273), describing that peers make girls realize they are a grown-up. In the same way, Dadi bans Saleha from the party, marking her youth is over. The romance stories teach her about sex and pleasure. When her mother discovers, she sends Saleha to French class to keep her busy. There, Saleha falls in love with her teacher, experiencing new youth senses. Dadi and her mother's prayers for Zeba introduce a new proposal, Gullan, a Shia Syed banker from Bhakuraj. Dadi is thrilled when Gullan's family visits, Zeba laughs uncontrollably at the sight of him because of his starched pink embroidered shalwar kameez, red handkerchief on his mouth, and hair greased with pungent sesame oil. Dadi is ready to accept, but Zeba protests and sits in a workshop in Islamabad for a week. Zeba returns to spurn Gullan. She requests Dadi to arrange for a private meeting with Gullan so that she can make up her mind. There is a formal meeting at a hotel where Zeba inquires about his interests. They are too different, so Zeba rejects him. Two things happen in Islamabad in the interim. Zeba falls for a boy named Omer and secretly calls him on the phone; her friend Saba knows. Saleha is in love with her French teacher, who loves another. Saleha tells Zeba about her love, and Zeba says it's a fleeting teenage phase, not love.

Saleha overheard Zeba secretly calling on the phone and demands the truth. Zeba admits she loves Omer. Omer is a doctor residing in Karachi with his widowed father. The catch is that he is Sunni, and to add to that, his name "Omer" makes it obvious, immediately identifying him. This lands Zeba in trouble. Then Moharram begins and suspends marriage negotiations for forty days. Zeba relaxes after Gullan, but Gullan's family approaches Saleha's hand, but Saleha's mother politely declines saying it is not the Bhakuraj fashion to ask for one sister's hand after spurning the other. Moreover, at majlis different women approach Zeba for her phone number. One day, after a 'Majlis' with Saleha, thirsty Dadi requests water and medicine from her son. Dadi spots Zeba in a cafe enjoying ice cream with a boy (Omer) with their spoons. Dadi rushes in, scolds Zeba, and drags her out. Dadi loudly scolds Zeba and other couples around, denouncing their dress, language, and culture. Zeba is taken aback. Dadi makes a scene; Zeba's father goes pale. He asks Zeba about the boy and she gently says "Omer". Hussain holds his head. Later, the family questions Zeba about Omer in the lounge as if she is a criminal. Zeba tells them all, even her feelings during previous proposal meetings. She mocks those traditions, angering Dadi. Zeba asks her parents if they are happy with her discomfort and stress during those meetings, especially criticizing the Gullan affair. The family listens and they agree to meet Omer and his father. Dadi objects, warning the young will learn a lesson. Zeba suddenly reveals Saleha's crush. Saleha's mother glares at Saleha and cancels Saleha's French classes. A meeting is arranged at Omer's house and Dadi refuses to go. The rest go and find Omer and his father hospitable, decent, and responsible. Fatima Phupo plays a vital role in pushing this meeting. Hussain gets impressed and willing after meeting them. Fatima Phupo tells Dadi that Omer and his father are coming for dinner tomorrow and if Dadi will not go, Zeba will marry without her blessing. Haider shows the older generation is super strict about traditions and decisions, rejecting new things. Dadi personifies this hard patriarchal will. Zeba asks for Dadi's blessing even if Dadi feels she is

wrong; she cannot marry without her blessings. Qurat Dadi's granddaughter's wedding gives them a break from Zeba and Omer. There, enthusiastic Dadi teaches Saleha on dressing. People ask Dadi about Zeba. Irritated, Dadi finally announces Zeba soon to be engaged to a pathologist. This news is a joy and surprise to everyone, but Dadi departs immediately, without inquiring. Omer and his father come the following day. Qurat Dadi surprises them by coming while Omer is present. This humiliates Dadi. But Dadi retorts forcefully that Qurat Dadi's son wedded an African American Christian, so she has no right to ask. Qurat Dadi spreads this news like wildfire. Dadi fears people's reactions. People come with sweets, inquiring how this happened. Dadi manages this wisely. She describes illustrious pathologist Omer fell in love at the first sight with Zeba and praises Zeba's beauty. Dadi exaggerates Omer's profession, salary, and big house without a mother. When people comment about his sect, Dadi answers peacefully that as a motherless man with Zeba as the head woman in the house, he and his family will follow their Shia practices easily. Since Fareed Chacha died, Dadi lit a candle in the window annually. This year she didn't. When asked if she forgot, she says, "He's dead, and hugs Zeba tearfully, and requests her not to go away after marriage (p. 299). Omer's father was against dowry, but Dadi insisted Zeba be given a full dowry, believing it enables respectable girls to hold their heads high with in-laws. Dadi requests the family Maulana to perform the Nikah. Zeba's wedding is according to Bhakuraj traditions. Excitement comes back with Saima and Zeba both becoming pregnant. Pregnancy news is enormous. Hearing Saima is pregnant, Dadi says, "It's about time!"; hearing Zeba is pregnant, she says, "So soon?!" (p. 309). Dadi asserts modest girls should become pregnant within at least three months. After a duration of nine months, Saima gives birth to a male child named 'Fareed' as per Dadi's wishes, which brings her immense joy. Zeba delivers a female child; Omer proposes the name 'Ayesha,' a choice that could potentially cause Dadi a heart attack. Consequently, he opts for the name 'Shehar Bano' in memory of his deceased mother. The narrative concludes on a positive

note, conveying the notion that life continues. Haider illustrates the burdens imposed by patriarchal regulations on the youth, yet the younger generation manages to navigate these constraints with the endorsement of their elders.

Haider articulates a compelling feminist critique regarding gender dynamics within Pakistani society, specifically scrutinizing how the institution of marriage is utilized to perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. The character of Dadi plays a pivotal role in exemplifying these societal norms, particularly when she asserts, "All good girls marry boys of their mother's choice" (p. 7). This proclamation not only establishes the framework for familial expectations imposed upon women but also introduces a dichotomy that differentiates "good" compliant daughters from those who assert their independence. The employment of the term "good girls" positions adherence to tradition as a moral quality, implicitly labeling women who pursue personal agency as defiant or deviant. Such cultural narratives strip women of their right to make choices, reallocating that authority to family members predominantly the patriarchs, denying women control over decisions that significantly affect their lives. This framework serves as a reflection of broader institutionalized oppression that subjugates women under the guise of tradition and religious virtue. Assertions such as "pleasing God and our husbands" (p. 11) illuminate the intricate intertwining of religion and patriarchy, where spiritual satisfaction is frequently equated with marital compliance. In this paradigm, romantic love is "nonsense," thus reducing women's emotional desires to trivialities and elevating family duty to a place of honor. Through the mocking of love with the terms "love shove" Dadi exemplifies a cultural narrative which reduces female emotion and agency and elevates duty and conformity to virtues. Haider's depiction of this cultural logic challenges the assumption that sensibility and conformity are virtues assigned to women, rather than the representation of sensuality and self-expression as moral flaws. These are distinctions that are characteristic of patriarchal ideologies. Through these representations, Haider provokes the

reader to look beyond overt expressions of oppression and instead confront the more insidious cultural narratives that sustain the subordination of women. Malaika Phuppo, another female character, is reported to have "two passions: her husband and her shoes" (p. 19), again proving reductionist roles for women in patriarchal world. Her devotion to her husband upholds the notion that a woman's worthiness is subject to the status of her relationship with a man, while her preoccupation with shoes reinforces gender stereotypes that represent women as materialistic and superficial. These representations, when repeated, work to sustain the long-standing cultural attitudes that reduce women to domestic spheres while, at the same time, commodifying their image for purposes of capitalist exploitation. Haider challenges these double forces patriarchy and consumerism on restricting female agency and reducing women to simplistic representations. Moreover, the figure of Haroon Bhai is a vehicle through which male privilege is exposed. Dadi's adoration of her grandson, calling him a "prince" (p. 19), demonstrates the way masculinity is celebrated and rewarded for its singularity and promise, while women gain value only by conforming to societal standards. This bias towards male protagonists over female equivalents demonstrates the power disparities inherent in cultural discourses, where men are idealized, while women are evaluated according to stringent criteria of obedience, physical beauty, and usability. Haroon's role within the domestic framework contrasts starkly with the assessment of women, who are evaluated largely in terms of their marriage potential, thus highlighting a cultural double standard that perpetuates gender inequality. The contradiction is further underscored when Dadi insists that Haroon's future wife "must be qualified to get a good job" yet at the same time "must not want to get a job" (p. 33). This contradiction reflects a societal pattern where the education of women is valued only so far as it improves their chances of marriage. It reveals a fundamentally flawed system in which women are encouraged towards competence at the same time as they are denied the right to apply their qualifications towards the

realization of careers or independence. Far from empowering women to forge their own paths, education is made another tool for reinforcing patriarchal expectations. Thus, the narrative unmasks the role of marriage in perpetuating systemic subjugation, placing men in the position of providers and decision-makers, while training women for the role of submissive homemakers. Proclamations such as "What are men for?" (p. 33) highlight the stereotypical assumptions about gender roles that trap men and women alike in predetermined categories. Haider calls the audience to imagine a Pakistan in which individuals have the freedom to defy these limiting definitions and forge their own stories. This includes the deconstruction of negative stereotypes around different professions, as in the claim that "pilots are absolutely unacceptable because we all know that when they are not flying airplanes, they are despoiling air hostesses" (p. 33). Such a claim is an example of how women's professional choices are morally appraised, thus solidifying gender-specific assumptions and placing unwarranted blame on women for perceived moral failures of men. The social norms around an ideal bride, such as being "from a respectable family" or "shorter than Haroon Bhai" (p. 33), reinforce this further and point to the way in which women are appraised on the basis of family background and physical attributes rather than intrinsic qualities. Such superficial appraisals reinforce an archetypal, patriarchal, and class-based framework where a woman's value is measured in accordance with fit to preconceived social archetypes. The requirement that a bride has "long, silky, thick hair" and has dazzlingly fair features" (p. 33) adds another layer of discrimination based on patriarchal inheritances of standards of beauty and colorism. These standards of beauty, the basis of South Asian standards of beauty, go on to exclude those who do not fit into the schema. By presenting these social norms satirically, Haider challenges the reader to ask the question of these norms and decide whether such conventions are arbitrary and prejudicial. Saleha's affirmation that "we intertwined six girls for Haroon Bhai" (p. 41) painfully establishes the objectification of women in the

context of arranged marriages, where identities are lost and women are mere possibilities for man's approval. The use of the word "intertwined" implies manipulation and lack of agency, turning the matchmaking process into a means of social coercion. Similarly, the concept of a "list of acceptable girls" (p. 37) brings out the way women are evaluated on the basis of patriarchal standards that value physical appearance, behavior, and economic status over ambitions or compatibility. The inherent sexism in the system is further amplified by the assumption that "if the first session was successful, then the second meeting would be arranged for Haroon Bhai to see and approve" (p. 37), which reinforces how male preference drives the matchmaking system and further deprives women of their agency. Statements like "She's pretty. Not beautiful. A little too thin. she will prick you like a thorn" (p. 65) indicate the derogatory judgments made on women's bodies. The assumption that a woman has to change her body shape to suit a man's needs indicates that her value is subject to male approval. Feminism deems these assumptions as legacies of patriarchal ideologies that objectify women and deny them control over their bodies. By employing metaphors like "thorn," women are brought down to their ability to give or deny pleasure, thus tracing back sexist hierarchies in intimate relationships. Dadi's insistence that "good girls should be seen and not heard" (p. 67) is a classic example of silencing women as a tool for social control. The argument that "a woman is incomplete if she doesn't know her way around the kitchen" (p. 71) confirms the belief that a woman's domestic role is at the center of her existence. Such assumptions bring women down to being valuable only when they serve to pleasure others, thus reinforcing the traditional gender roles that deny them the freedom to follow their ambitions and limit their freedom. The contention that "we women are built to have children, to create families" (p. 159) is an instance of biological determinism used to explain women's exclusion from the public sphere and their confinement to their reproductive functions. It is an argument exposed by feminism and shows how traces of patriarchy have shaped oppressive social norms

that devalue women's autonomy in decision-making about their own bodies and lives. Saleha's question, "Why don't I have the same right?" and Dadi's response, "Because you are a girl and should be thankful that he wants to marry you at all!" (p. 163), forcefully brings to the forefront the systemic gender inequality grounded in marriage practices. Dadi's response demonstrates a deep-seated assumption that a woman's value is inherently invested in being chosen by a man regardless of her own desires or preferences.

Conclusion

Shazaf Fatima Haider's novel *How It Happened* presents a critique of the long-term dominance of patriarchal norms over the lives of women of modern Pakistani society. The novel explores the deeply ingrained traditions that govern marriage, inter-personal relations, and gender roles and examines how such traditions are upheld, challenged, and negotiated through various generations of women. Empowering itself with the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, especially as it was presented in *The Second Sex* 1997, this framework explores how Haider's narrative encapsulates the predicament of women caught between the double bind of conformity to society and the imperative of self-determination. Beauvoir's contention that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" explains how societal norms teach girls early in their lives to behave, communicate, and think in harmony with cultural norms. This is the very dynamic which is emotionally captured through the lives of the characters like Zeba, Saleha, and Dadi. Dadi, both the tough and old-fashioned character, symbolizes the double role of being a product and a perpetuator of patriarchal norms. She firmly believes in arranged marriages, strict gender roles, and strict expectations of women's conduct. Dadi has internalized the belief that good women should be submissive to matrimonial choices ordained by their elders, be good household managers, and be epitomes of obedience and modesty. Her beliefs are not egocentric, they are deeply ingrained in her upbringing and the social constructs that defined the world she was living in, thus making her a multidimensional character and not a one-

dimensional caricature. Nevertheless, her characterization in the novel depicts how women can unknowingly become agents of patriarchy when they uncritically internalize dominant norms and insist on conformity from others.

The focus on marriage in the novel is used to show how the institution is the biggest thing in a woman's life. Girls are conditioned for their roles as wife and mother from an early age. Zeba's life is a classic example of this aspect. Her spurning of various proposals, followed by her eventual decision to marry a man of her choice, emphasizes her desire for freedom. However, her life is full of conflict, as her choices create tension and even estrangement from her family, especially from Dadi. Alongside this, her love, Omer, is controversial in that he belongs to a different sect, and this highlights the degree to which religious identity limits a woman's freedom. Haider thus shows how love is not enough in a social environment in which family reputation, religious identity, and tradition carry more weight. Zeba's insistence on not keeping her feelings secret from her family and her adamant refusal to marry a man she dislikes are acts of rebellion. However, her rebellion is channeled with respect and deference, and this helps to bring about a change in attitude in her family over time. Her father, Hussain, and eventually even Dadi come to accept her choice. This is not a complete rejection of tradition but emphasizes that change is possible gradually when women rise up and when elders are willing to listen. Saleha's story, however, is an example of the ways in which girls are taught to accept their place in society without question. Her observations and thoughts mirror the confusion and pressure she is under as she enters adulthood. Her conclusion that arranged marriages are the only respectable choice for women, and her disillusionment with woman objectifying matchmaking, is evidence of the emotional price that is paid for such practices by young minds. Her unrequited love for her French teacher and the repercussions that follow its discovery are evidence of the influence that society has over the behavior, emotions, and thoughts of women. Dadi's

response to her wish for romance, such as stopping her French lessons, is an example of the ways in which any expression of female desire is quickly suppressed. Beauvoir discusses the ways in which society uses shame, fear, and domination to restrict women's awareness of themselves as complete human beings. The same dynamic is used within the story, where girls are taught to be passive, adopt a stoic attitude towards their feelings, and train for a life that is largely about other people's needs. Haider doesn't suggest the war against patriarchy is won, but she does illustrate that change is possible when individuals begin questioning, speaking, and standing together. Beauvoir's theory accounts for how deeply society defines women and how difficult it is to break free. This research illustrates that *How It Happened* is more than a family story. It is an illustration of real issues faced by women of all cultures where tradition, religion, and societal expectations dictate their choices. The story is filled with moments of suffering and moments of courage, silence and voice, pressure and freedom.

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