

The Author's Culpability Regarding Sexual Objectification of Women in The Holy Woman

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Abstract:

This study aims to assess the novel The Holy Woman (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz for the female author's own accountability in becoming an involuntary accomplice of patriarchy in the sexual objectification of women. The scrutiny proceeds spanning the dual foci of authorial intention and reader reception as postulated by Dr. Masood Ashraf Raja in The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectations (2018). The authorial intention is one of realistic portrayal of feminine beauty while the reader's reception could be the perception of a sexual objectification of the female characters of the novel. This study focuses on the writer's seemingly gratuitous references to female physical attraction in what amounts to a proxy performance of the male gaze. This aspect may certainly be argued in favor of the writer's legitimate attempt to describe the beauty of the female characters. But, the fact remains that on many occasions these characters are described with a hyperbolic sensuous zeal which breaches the dramatic decorum at that point in the narrative. This study examines the phenomenon of sexual

objectification of women through the lens of Objectification Theory as formulated in a seminal article of the same name by Fredrickson et al., (1997).

Key Words: sexual objectification, patriarchy, authorial intention, reader reception, gender discrimination.

1. Introduction:

Frequently, literary depictions of women repeat societal stereotypes of a woman as an object of male conquest and sexual desire. These are the gender roles men and women share in patriarchic societies. These pervasive gender norms are passed down from generation to generation. Even in the modern era, women are still sexually objectified in many parts of the world where patriarchy rules the roost. In a society where obtaining control over women's sexuality is important to maintaining patriarchal and feudal systems, both brute force and insidious tactics are used to create and maintain such control. In addition to these stratagems, an advertent or inadvertent role is played by oblique or subliminal insinuations in literary works. The most potent of these are to be found in works of fiction. This study argues that, in the present case, the author too can be held accountable for the sexual objectification of some of the characters she has created. However, such a line of inquiry does not assume any deliberate endeavor on the part of the author. At this point, it would be advantageous to examine the issues of authorial intention and reader reception.

2. Background of the Study

This study proceeds under the caveat prompted by McLoughlin & Gardner's observation that although many theorists advocate authorial intention as the foundation for interpretation, their

actual practice is an exercise in text-based hermeneutics.¹ Therefore, any conclusions reached at the culmination of this inquiry should in no way be considered as the final word on this matter. However, David Henige's contention can be used as a springboard for this discussion. It holds that the unambiguous and justifiable goal of all textual criticism is to capture (or re-capture) the exact aims of the creator(s) of a text, or "authorial intent," as manifested in the words and other signs of that text.²

2.1. Statement of the Problem

Regarding the motivating problem of this research, there is a vital and relevant observation of Dr. Masood Ashraf Raja to be taken into consideration: he maintains that Pakistani novelists find themselves encumbered by the impossible task of speaking as "representatives," because they are widely expected to "speak for" the marginalized communities to which they originally belong.³ He goes on to state that the onus of representation carried by the writer is of a dual nature in that metropolitan audiences and market exigencies force him or her to be "representative" of their culture, while primary culture expects authors to represent the entirety of their (the primary) culture. While exercising the liberty of hiding behind their right to artistic license, what Pakistani writers write and offer to the so-called West is more than just an artistic representation because it becomes a political statement.⁴ His observation indicates the precarious terrain a critic has to traverse when dealing with such issues.

¹ Kate McLoughlin and Carl Gardner, "When Is Authorial Intention Not Authorial Intention?" *European Journal of English Studies* 11, no. 1 (2007): 93–105, doi:10.1080/13825570601183427.

² David Henige, "In Quest of Error's Sly Imprimatur: The Concept of 'Authorial Intent' in Modern Textual Criticism," *History in Africa* 14 (1987): 87–112, doi:10.2307/3171834.

³ Masood Ashraf Raja, "The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectations," *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 6 (January 2, 2018): 1–17.

⁴ *Ibid*

2.2. Significance of the Study

The aim of this study is to highlight the authorial difficulties faced by Pakistani writers when presenting their work in an international urban market while trying to maintain a hold on their primary culture. Furthermore, these authors are caught between the conflicting demands of realism and reality. Here, “realism” being the depiction of reality while “reality” being the demands and constraints imposed by home audiences. This issue raises its head especially when the all too natural issue of sexuality is to be depicted. Consequently, it would be informative to examine the role, conscious or unconscious, played by female authors in this regard.

2.3. Sexual Objectification

Zarri Bano, a young woman from rural Pakistan in the present day is the main character in *The Holy Woman*. She is compelled into becoming a holy woman, forbidden from marrying and expected to devote herself to a celibate religious life due to a calamitous circumstance in her family. This tragic turn of events takes place when she has already been engaged to a man named Sikander who is also passionately in love with her. So, despite the fact that the central figure, a holy woman, is obligated to remain celibate, the book is primarily about her and another man.⁵ Therefore, the sexual objectification of Zarri Bano is a counterpart of the sexual objectification of Sikander. The same holds true for the author’s depiction of another male/female pair—Khawar and Firdaus. This binary template is the grid on which the present study lays out its assessment. An added dimension is the authorial fascination with the physical beauty of Khawar’s mother Chaudharani Kaniz. Since the sexual objectification of women is the primary concern of this study,

⁵ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1997): 173–206, doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x.

an opinion from the formulators of its theoretical lens is pertinent here: They maintain that when a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her, sexual objectification occurs.⁶ This observation is carried across the gender divide by the assertion that it appears to have become the generally endorsed right of all males, regardless of age or status, to sexualize all females.⁷ Here, it is worth mentioning that they also see such objectification arising from sexualized gazing as a devious and everyday practice. This point is of vital importance because, as has been mentioned earlier in this study, on many occasions the writer herself appears to execute a proxy performance of the sexualized gaze.

Sexual objectification manifested as body evaluation experiences are more subtle and work by perpetuating sexist attitudes among women themselves.⁸ One target of indictment is the visual media that focuses on bodies and body parts while aligning viewers with a tacit sexualizing gaze.⁹ Furthermore, Szymanski et al., 2010¹⁰ declare that the media usually depicts a narrow and often unachievable standard of women's physical beauty and associates this standard with a woman's sexiness and worth. This may account for the fact that women may react to sexual objectification in a variety of ways, including confronting the perpetrator, ignoring the action, blaming themselves, or viewing the action as flattering. Additionally, Kelland contends that what happens in a sexual objectification encounter establishes an implicit threat that pervades the lived experience of being a woman under patriarchy. Civile and Obhi maintain that power itself is

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Gemma Sáez, Inmaculada Valor-Segura, and Francisca Expósito, "Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Experiences: Psychological and Social Well-Being Consequences for Women," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34, no. 4 (2016): 741–62, doi:10.1177/0886260516645813.

⁹ See supra note 5

¹⁰ Dawn M. Szymanski, Lauren B. Moffitt, and Erika R. Carr, "Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research 1Ψ7," *The Counseling Psychologist* 39, no. 1 (2010): 6–38, doi:10.1177/0011000010378402.

associated with changes in the processing of sexualized human targets, independent of the gender of the power holder.¹¹ This study takes cognizance of the fact that an author wields real power over the reader and thus is in a position to sexually objectify any character he or she chooses.

2.4. Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives of this study:

- i. Ascertaining descriptive elements of the narrative that foreground the physical attributes of both male and female characters in the novel.
- ii. Pinpointing descriptive elements of the narrative that foreground the physical attributes of the female characters in the novel.
- iii. Identifying parts of the narrative where the description of female physical attraction transgresses the dramatic decorum of the narrative.

2.5. Research Questions

1. Which descriptive elements of the narrative indicate the sexual objectification of women?
2. Which elements of the text approximate the male gaze by proxy?
3. Where in the text does the description of female physical attraction transgress the dramatic decorum of the narrative?

¹¹ Ciro Civile and Sukhvinder S. Obhi, "Power, Objectification, and Recognition of Sexualized Women and Men," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2015): 199–212, doi:10.1177/0361684315604820.

3. Literature Review

The research papers and articles reviewed in pursuit of the objectives of this study are dealt with in the following paragraph. These are discussed as they occur in chronological order, with the exception of the first two cited as they do not furnish any date of publication.

Vivi Fatmawati cites Iris Marion Young as opining that exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence are the five types of oppression.¹²

Whereas, Regina et al observe that, in Pakistan, the fate of a daughter is determined by her family's elders; the fate of a Pakistani daughter is created and determined by her father or brother. However, Aisha Jadoon prefers to take a singularly religious perspective.¹³

Her aim is to affirm the empowering influences of the signature garment worn by purdah-observing Muslim women.¹⁴

Tajul Mafakhir in his thesis states that Pakistan has a patriarchal system that is still prevalent. This patriarchal system is responsible for many gender inequalities that women face. Gender discrimination against Pakistani women can be seen in the habits of a Pakistani woman throughout her life, which has always been subject to men.¹⁵

¹² Vivi Fatmawati, "Zarri Banos Oppression in Qaisra Shahrazs The Holy Woman," *Litera Kultura : Journal Of Literary And Cultural Studies* 7, no. 4 (2019): 1–9.

¹³ Gentry Regina, Agnes Setyowati H, and Shita Dewi Ratih P, "The Main Character's Independence in Qaisra Shahraz's the Holy Woman," *Journal Albion : Journal of English Literature, Language, and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2020): 1–13, doi:10.33751/albion.v2i1.1799.

¹⁴ Aisha Jadoon, "A Feminist Turned Holy Woman: Image of the Veiled Muslim Woman in Qaisra Shahraz's Novel The Holy Woman," *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (June 2005): 1–15.

¹⁵ Tajaul Mafakhir, "The Struggle of Zarri Bano against Patriarchy in Qaisra Shahraz's 'The Holy Woman.'" (thesis, 2016).

In *Violence Ritualized: The Chemistry of Tradition and Religion in Qaisra Shahraz's The Holy Woman* (2017), Nausheen Ishaque declares that one of the author's favorite themes is human suffering and agony at the hands of a perverted fate. This is evident in the case of Zarri Bano, her main character in *The Holy Woman*.¹⁶

Today, the romance genre provides a platform for Pakistani women writers to codify and reconfigure their potential role in the nationalist milieu. Shahraz's novel expresses her concerns about the manipulation of these nationalistic cultural politics, which play out in the lives and bodies of rural Sindh women in Pakistan. It is also noted that, in the same article, it is indicated that the most distinguishing feature of Shahraz's cultural narratology in *The Holy Woman* is the newly emerging Muslim woman of our time. One of Ishaque's observations is noteworthy in her statement that many writers, particularly those with diasporic or postcolonial identities, write for a Western audience. This comes with the corollary problem that such works may ascribe normative value to Western ways of viewing and criticizing non-Western cultures and lifestyles.

An opinion more germane to the aims of this study is voiced by Nausheen Ishaque in the same article when she says about Qaisra Shahraz: "Her plots are featured by melodrama too, something which may arguably posit her as a 'native informer'".¹⁷ The possibility of her being considered a "native informer" attracts the concerns raised by Dr. Masood Ashraf Raja when he opines that whatever these writers write about, their acts of artistic representation appear to be entangled in national politics and national representation.¹⁸ Of even more heightened relevance to this study is

¹⁶ Nausheen Ishaque, "Violence Ritualized: The Chemistry of Tradition and Religion in Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*," SAGE Open 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–8, doi:10.1177/2158244017701527.

¹⁷ Nausheen Ishaque, "Violence Ritualized: The Chemistry of Tradition and Religion in Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*," SAGE Open 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–8, doi:10.1177/2158244017701527, 2.

¹⁸ See supra note 3

the fact that Nausheen Ishaque refers to Shahraz's plots tending towards melodrama. This criticism can be extended to her descriptive technique especially when it comes to the physical attractions of both male and female characters. The sensuous descriptions of bodily attributes and labored sexual innuendo transgress into the realm of objectification. Notably, these descriptions occur more while dealing with female characters rather than with male characters.

4. Research Methodology

The identification of the descriptive elements that perpetrate the sexual objectification of female characters in the novel constitutes the ontological approach of this study. The epistemological direction lies in auditing the concepts of Objectification Theory elicited by the author's description of physical attractiveness in the characters of the novel, with special reference to the female characters. Consequently, the research is qualitative in nature.

Method & Materials

- a) A close reading of the text of *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz.
- b) Application of key concepts from *Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks* (1997) by Fredrickson et al.
- c) Scrutiny of relevant research papers and articles.

Theoretical Framework

Qaisra Shahraz's description of the attractive physical attributes of female characters in the novel is brought under the lens of the Objectifying Gaze as propounded by Fredrickson et al. (1997) and audited as a proxy performance of the same. The theorists declare that the Objectifying Gaze is encountered in three related domains. First, there is the domain of interpersonal and social

encounters. Second, a sexually objectifying gaze also occurs in visual media that depict interpersonal and social encounters.. The third is when media in visual form, highlights bodies and body parts, and the viewer's perspective is aligned with an inherent sexualizing gaze.¹⁹ The second and third points have a very strong bearing on the aims of this study as the novel can readily be seen as a visual medium because of its eidetic propensity. Furthermore, the third point also considers the role of the reader being a collaborator in the Objectifying Gaze initiated by the author. In this way, the lines between the burden of representation borne by the author and the horizon of expectation harbored by the reader are blurred beyond recognition.

5. Discussion And Analysis

At the very onset of this section, it must be asserted that in *The Holy Woman*, the author is as culpable as the characters in the sexual objectification of both men and women. Regarding this, fact that Zarri Bano and Kaniz are described with a melodramatic sensuous zeal cannot be denied. It is to be noted that the almond-shaped eyes of the latter are explicitly described no less than six different times in the novel. In fact, the author seems to be so obsessed with colored eyes that Zarri Bano's green eyes, along with those of her father and grandfather, are mentioned thirteen times. Sikandar's grey eyes are mentioned nine times. This study is concerned with the sexual objectification of women which, being rooted in a binary phenomenon, can be studied advantageously when seen in the light of such objectification being directed from, and along, both axes of the gender divide.

The novel begins with the formulation of a prologue in which Sikandar sees Zarri Bano at the village fair. He is struck by her physical beauty and her open show of defiance against the

¹⁹ See supra note 5

traditional cultural norm of covering her head in public. It is important to note that, ostensibly, her uncovered head is a challenge to the prevailing traditional and feudal norms. But, the uncovered head itself is an unveiling of feminine beauty and, in ensconcing this fact in a prologue, the writer strikes the keynote of sexual objectification at the very beginning of the novel. An authorial comment is noteworthy here whereby it is noted that Zarri Bano was in the wrong spot at the wrong time and under the gaze of the wrong individuals.

The first chapter of the novel begins with Sikandar's family visit seeking Zarri Bano's hand in marriage. Her memory of the encounter at the fair is dominated by what she remembers as "his searing glance". It must be noted that this is her personal interpretation of his way of looking at her. So, the matter of sexual objectification is also, at least, a matter of subjective perception on the part of the woman. This is all the more so when she herself has feelings in that direction as is evinced by her reaction in front of the mirror when "she glimpsed a look of uncertainty in her eyes, and something else".²⁰ The last three words in the quote are noteworthy as they depict Zarri Bano's as yet non-familiarity with her own nascent sexuality. These feelings are reinforced by Ruby telling her that she is too beautiful a woman to be left on the shelf. Ruby's ostensibly innocent choice of words is an unconscious sexual objectification of her sister.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the novel is how the writer herself objectifies the physical beauty of certain characters—most notably that of Kaniz. The first such reference occurs in Chapter Two when the focus is supposed to be on Kaniz's pride at being, after Shahzada's move to the city, the wealthiest present chaudharani in the village. However, the author incorporates a phrase eulogizing the beauty of the woman's mouth into a sentence meant to inform the reader of

²⁰ Qaisra Shahraz, *The Holy Woman* (London: BlackAmber, 2007), 16.

one of many conceited gestures made by Kaniz. The author's obsession with Kaniz's physical beauty and the latter's vulgar reference to Firdaus being a "slut" after seeing her with Khawar illustrates how women can also be culpable in the sexual objectification of one another.

Sexual objectification by societal norms has already been mentioned in this discussion. Another significant illustration of this fact is seen when Zarri Bano appears as a mourning sister with her head uncovered. The covering of the female head has become so much a symbol of gentility and decorum on the part of women that its underlying sexual connotations are rendered indistinct. This connotation is rooted in the almost unanimously accepted fact that a woman's hair is an intrinsic part of her physical beauty. The writer does add an extenuating element by mentioning that Zarri Bano had never ever tried to cover her head when among her relatives. Zarri Bano explains this to her father by saying that she is a worldly woman and cannot become a nun.

Among the many examples of the writer's own obsession with sensuality is seen in Chapter Sixteen. This happens when there is a kludgy twist in the plot which enables Sikandar to be alone with Zarri Bano in the backyard of her father's haveli after she has declared her decision to be a Shahzadi Ibadat. Roused from a nap in the sun, she overcomes the initial shock of seeing Sikandar standing before her and begins to feel an irresistible urge of physical desire. The writer couches this arousal in the following pseudo-mystical expression: "Sheer waves of pleasure lapped and coursed through her body, watering the rose garden of her heart, to burst into full bloom".²¹ This is followed by a detailed description of Zarri Bano's own physical beauty where her throat is described as a white column and her feminine curves and half-bare arms are given literal prominence. She is portrayed as being drowned in the sensuous spell of Sikandar's eyes and being

²¹ Qaisra Shahraz, *The Holy Woman* (London: BlackAmber, 2007), 122.

unable to look away from his handsome face. There is, in fact, a physical culmination of sorts to this state of arousal when Zarri Bano loses control of herself and begins to caress Sikandar's face. Despite the norms of that society and the inappropriateness of the locale, this physical intimacy itself is natural and does not amount to any sexual objectification of each other by the characters. However, the fact remains that, for the writer, the sexual dimension holds a premium. Within the context of this study, this is the sexual objectification of authorial origin.

It is significant that, on her arrival at her hosts' home in Cairo, Zarri Bano is quick to note the striking good looks of their son Ibrahim Musa. For his part, Ibrahim Musa cannot help wanting to see Zarri Bano without her burqa. All the while "He stared at her face, noting the attractive dimple suddenly peeping in her left cheek".²² This episode is soon followed by a telephone conversation between Zarri Bano and Ruby where the latter inquires whether her sister's new male acquaintance is good-looking and gets this answer: "He has a black beard and a dark wide pool of eyes that you disappear into". In this way, the inevitability and potency of physical attraction is emphasized not once but many times in this novel. In events soon to follow, Zarri Bano feels that a physical awareness has arisen between her and her and Ibrahim Musa and herself. Surprisingly, she is disconcerted to notice that Ibrahim Musa has stopped calling her sister. It must be reiterated that this brother/sister formulation is a societal defense mechanism desperately contrived to use the guilt of incest as an antidote against sexual feelings rising up between young men and women. In the given instance, however, it fails to hold up as soon as Ibrahim Musa catches sight of Zarri Bano without her burqa. The writer gives a fulsome description of what he sees: "The short sleeves of her dress revealed her arms above her elbows. Her throat and the rest of her feminine beauty was

²² Ibid, 196.

apparent to his gaze in all its glory”.²³ And, Zarri Bano cannot find herself above such feelings when her back throbs imagining his “male eyes” roaming on it. She admits to herself that she will never feel the same in his presence again. It would be a matter of interest to formalists, and perhaps grammarians too, as to why the author takes the trouble to use the word “male” where the eyes clearly belong to a man.

Chapter Twenty-Seven is full of references to male and female beauty. The author is inordinately partial to the beauty of Kaniz’s eyes and mouth especially when the woman is in a fit of anger or sadness. Her almond-shaped eyes are noted once when she is having a confrontation with Firdaus in the latter’s office and then again in Chapter Thirty when Sabra tells her to accept Firdaus as a daughter-in-law. On this occasion, the writer also gets a chance to tell us that Sabra was “...totally unprepared for the molten lava of words ready to erupt from the crater of Kaniz’s beautiful mouth”.²⁴ The image of a beautiful mouth that looks like a volcanic crater is left for the reader to imagine. The next chapter has instances where Zarri Bano is said to have green eyes while the color of Ruby’s is not considered worth mentioning. Furthermore, Zarri Bano’s anguish at learning about the impending marriage of Sikandar and her sister is described “with tears of agony glimmering like green mysterious gems in her eyes”.²⁵ The connection between tears of agony and mysterious green gems in the woman’s eyes is left for the reader to discover. Zarri Bano’s torment reveals a dominant sexual perspective as we are told that thoughts of marital intimacy between Sikandar and Ruby feel like a knife twisting inside her. Her prayer for relief says it eloquently: “Douse this longing, this fire that is engulfing my body”.²⁶

²³ Ibid, 202-203

²⁴ Ibid, 217

²⁵ Ibid, 218

²⁶ Ibid, 241

In Chapter Thirty-Seven, we read more about Kaniz's physical beauty when we are told about the long column of her neck and also, yet again, about her almond-shaped eyes. The next chapter also repeats the brother/sister conundrum when Ibrahim Musa begs Zarri Bano not to call him brother as he harbors no brotherly feelings towards her. He makes it clear that his feelings are sexual for her as they were kindled the day he saw her without her veil. Further along in the novel, the writer gets yet another chance to extoll the beauty of Kaniz when mention is made of her long thick hair wound up into a long thick plait. Here, the writer also makes a physical assessment of Khawar as having a large body. At the end of Chapter Forty, we are yet again treated to Kaniz's almond-shaped eyes as they retain their nutty beauty even after getting puffy after a heavy bout of crying.

Another example of irrelevant sexual objectification by the author is seen in Chapter Fifty-One when Zarri Bano is countering the insistence of Baba Siraj Din that she marry Sikandar. Here the "grim line of her soft pink mouth"²⁷ is described. The grim line has full applicability to the situation but the sensuous reference to the texture and color of Zarri Bano's mouth is completely irrelevant. A lot of interaction between Zarri Bano, Sikandar, and even Ibrahim Musa after her retreat into spiritual life is dotted with the inverse sexual objectification of the brother/sister relationship. Even Zarri Bano herself is shown to be using this formulation as a weapon when Sikandar makes a second attempt at marrying her. The weapon proves to be very effective as Sikandar winces at her addressing him as "brother". Zarri Bano's use of the word and Sikandar's reaction to it leave no doubt that the brother/sister construct is conceived and used as a cover for the sexual objectification of both men and women. For the purposes of this study, we are concerned with the latter point.

²⁷ Ibid, 358

In Chapter Fifty-Two we see Kaniz using a totally uncalled-for adjective while describing a post-wedding night incident to Sabra when she mentions her own long hair while relating an entirely unconnected matter. This is yet another incidence of the writer's obsession with Kaniz's physical beauty, and another instance of sexual objectification. Further on in the story, there is a stage when Zarri Bano begins to countenance becoming Sikandar's wife. Sikandar promises not to make certain "demands" when she becomes his wife. Zarri Bano's mind is overcome with sensuous images of marital intimacy which she had entertained far back in the past but had since blotted out from her thoughts. Concerning this, Sikandar has recourse to another euphemism when he tells his mother that he will be only a friend and companion to Zarri Bano until she is ready for "a more fulfilling marital relationship"²⁸. So, in the final analysis, sexual relations are declared to be the prime goal of a marriage.

When Firdaus does finally acquiesce to marry Khawar, she takes great care to appear physically appealing to him: "She had exchanged her long chunky plait for a shoulder cut. Her raven-black hair framed her face most attractively, he was forced to admit"²⁹. After an initial ego tantrum, Khawar too decides to submit to her affections, and they meet by an old village well. Here, the exchange of sensually charged glances between them is the writer's attempt to inject melodramatically colored sexuality into the scene. Firdaus lets her eyes roam over his hair and neck as is visible from his shirt collar while Khawar does the same in return. In the same vein, there are attempts to inject restrained sexuality during the time when Sikandar and Zarri Bano begin their marital life. First, we are told, at this stage in the story, that Zarri Bano had a beautiful dimple that "peeped out" every time she smiled. Then, in the bridal chamber, Sikandar is reported

²⁸ Ibid, 388

²⁹ Ibid, 397

to be looking very attractive because of his gleaming post-shower hair, dressing gown, and pajamas. Zarri Bano herself revels in the knowledge that she still holds the power of attraction over him. It is, however, quite surprising that when he looks at her with sexual desire she responds thus: “Now you rape me with your eyes”.³⁰ Evidently, she is shown to be laboring under the impression that even her husband, under the compulsion of conjugal desire, is subjecting her to sexual objectification. Notwithstanding this fact, in the very next chapter, she finds herself in the grip of the same feelings as the ones she is so apprehensive of when manifested in her husband. She wants to run her hand through his wet crispy curls—and duly succumbs more than fully to this desire. It is noteworthy that she has no idea “whence the insatiable desire” comes. Finally, and thankfully, Sikandar and Zarri Bano do have what decisively turns out to be a proper honeymoon in Malaysia. Here again, the change is signaled when Sikandar is described as luxuriating in Zarri Bano’s beauty as she appears against the jungle backdrop of a rubber plantation. It is noteworthy that there are no extreme descriptions of sexuality in the novel although in these next to closing lines of the novel, the writer describes Zarri Bano’s acquiescence to being a normal wife to Sikandar: “There was nothing to hide. Nothing to hold back. He had unlocked all her doors and also held the key – to everything”.³¹ The appending of the phrase “to everything” is certainly a sexual reference as that was the only unresolved issue left between Sikandar and Zarri Bano till then. The last sentence of the novel describes an old Malay rubber tapper scraping away at a tree to let the rubber gum ooze out for the benefit of some new tourists. This image may, with due restraint, be seen as a metaphor for the commencement of a natural flow of marital feelings between the newlywed husband and wife.

³⁰ Ibid, 441

³¹ Ibid, 481

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, sexual objectification of the female body has clearly permeated our cultural milieu; it is likely to affect most girls and women to a greater or lesser extent. With specific reference to *The Holy Woman*, it can be surmised that some female characters also face a significant amount of blame for creating their own predicament. This in no way underplays the overarching phenomenon of the role that men play in this regard. Furthermore, the sexual objectification of both men and women in *The Holy Woman* may be seen as an element of the author's artistic technique. This study concludes with the recommendation that Pakistani novelists take cognizance of the fact that gratuitous attempts at melodrama may create the very ills they set out to redress.

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