

Patriarchy, Power and Protest: Women's Agency in South Asian and African Literature

by

Mahnoor Bano

A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2025

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner:	Shazia Sadaf
	Associate Professor, Carleton University
Supervisor:	Heather Smyth
	Associate Professor, University of Waterloo
Internal Members:	Jasmin Habib
	Professor, University of Waterloo
	Jay Dolmage
	Professor, University of Waterloo
Internal/External Examiner:	Douglas Peers
	Professor, University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the marginalization of women and their agency in the context of both literature reflecting the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent and African novels, examining the evolution of patriarchal structures and the ways in which women navigate and challenge these systems. Through an analysis of key texts, including *What the Body Remembers*, *Cracking India*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *Woman at Point Zero*, this study highlights the patriarchal manipulation of religion, tradition, and women's roles as wives and mothers to enforce patriarchal control. Despite the doubly marginalized position of women, these narratives reveal how women have created voices and "mini-narratives" that puncture the overarching patriarchal structures. The research also delves into contemporary examples of women's oppression, such as widow immolation, honor killings, and female genital mutilation, analyzing the patriarchal discourses that circulate in these accounts and contextualizing these within ongoing global patriarchal trends. Additionally, this dissertation examines the political implications of the Western representation of Muslim women, particularly through the discourse on the veil, and argues that the Western stance on such symbols mirrors patriarchal tactics of marginalization. The study asserts that, despite the silencing forces of patriarchy, women consistently carve out spaces for agency and resistance through storytelling, both in historical and modern contexts.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have supported me throughout the journey of completing this dissertation.

Dr. Heather Smyth, thank you for being such an amazing person and a pillar of support. Your guidance, patience, and invaluable feedback have been instrumental in shaping this work. Her encouragement and critical insights helped me navigate the complexities of this research.

I also wish to thank the members of my thesis committee – Dr. Jay Dolmage and Dr. Jasmin Habib – for their thoughtful suggestions and constructive feedback. Their expertise enriched the depth and breadth of this study.

I am grateful to my friend, Samar, for her camaraderie and moral support during this challenging yet rewarding academic pursuit. Her constant “you can do it” lectures and encouragement kept me going during difficult times. I would also like to thank my aunt, Ayesha Saqib, whose shock when I told her I was planning to quit conveyed to me that I might be making a mistake. Her reaction was a turning point, and it inspired me to continue with this journey.

Finally, I owe a special thanks to my family – Ami, Baba, Mehreen, Zoha – whose unwavering love and belief in me provided the strength I needed to finish this project. Their

support has been a constant source of inspiration. Thank you to everyone who has been part of this journey. This dissertation would not have been possible without your support.

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Introduction: Patriarchal Equilibrium: The Unstable Balance Between Control and Resistance

Patriarchy, as a system of power, does not remain static; it adapts, evolves, and reconfigures itself to maintain dominance. Judith Bennett's concept of "patriarchal equilibrium" is crucial to understanding this continuity-through-change, as it captures the ways in which patriarchal structures endure despite historical, social, and cultural transformations. This dissertation examines how women's voices and agency are shaped by and against this persistent patriarchal order, analyzing literary representations of women's marginalization and resistance across different historical moments and geopolitical contexts. By tracing this trajectory from older to more contemporary texts – spanning the partition of the subcontinent and African postcolonial narratives – this study argues that while forms of oppression may shift, the underlying patriarchal mechanisms remain strikingly resilient.

At the heart of this analysis is the tension between dominant patriarchal narratives and the counter-narratives women construct. The works explored in this dissertation – ranging from *What the Body Remembers* to *Things Fall Apart*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *Woman at Point Zero* – demonstrate how patriarchal ideology reinforces itself, often using tradition, religion, and gendered expectations to sustain male dominance. Yet, even within such oppressive structures, women carve out spaces of resistance, creating "mini-narratives" that challenge and disrupt the master discourse. This dissertation contends that these acts of resistance, while significant, do not necessarily dismantle patriarchy but rather force it to

adapt – an evolution that reinforces Bennett’s assertion that patriarchal power, rather than simply weakening or strengthening over time, maintains an equilibrium that recalibrates to counter women’s gains.

This perspective allows for a nuanced exploration of both historical and contemporary forms of gendered oppression, including widow immolation, honour killings, and the politicization of the veil. It also underscores the role of modern digital platforms in providing women with alternative spaces for self-representation, suggesting that while new mediums emerge, patriarchal structures remain deeply entrenched. By situating this study within the framework of "patriarchal equilibrium," this dissertation not only highlights the historical continuity of gendered oppression but also offers insights into its evolving manifestations in contemporary political and social contexts.

Throughout my childhood, I have been exposed to important lessons that were all taught by the female figures in my life. Our home had a matriarchal setup and what women said in terms of setting rules was religiously followed. Not questioning those rules and regulations went without saying. Among these women, my father’s mother, whom I used to call Amma, was the person in authority. In Pakistani culture, respect and authority are directly proportional to the age of the person so Amma being a towering figure at home was understandable. Every matter was discussed with her, and important decisions were never taken without consulting her. I, being a wee girl of five, thoroughly enjoyed these dynamics with the hope that one day I will assume Amma’s position and will finally be able to tell the cook what I like the most, so he sticks to it every day.

Despite this apparent matriarchal setup, there were times when I realized that Amma's authority was not exactly what it seemed to be. As I got older, I started paying attention to the ifs and buts raised by the male members of the family and Amma's increasing inclination towards giving in. I felt that Amma's authority was a façade that hid other dimensions associated with it. This authority was filled with loopholes that were constantly poked by people in an attempt to tweak the decisions taken or to further discuss what had already been decided. I realized that Amma was struggling but it was after two decades that I fully understood the magnitude of that struggle and the aspects connected with it.

During my bachelor's, we were required to work on a project in the last two terms of the program. Certain requirements were to be kept in mind before deciding what the project would be. One of these requirements was that the project had to be on a social issue. A group of girls from our batch proposed that we work on the subject of the marriage contract in Islam. It is commonly known as a 'Nikkah nama' in Urdu. This contract includes detailed information regarding the bride and the groom. The part of the contract that intrigued us as bachelor students was the section allocated to the rights of women. Particularly because of this section, we decided to work on the marriage contract. This section allowed women to put any conditions that they would want their partner to observe and since it would be mentioned in the contract, her spouse would be legally bound to observe that. The marriage contract also allows women the right to divorce. We aimed to raise awareness about the rights of women in connection to marriage and to address those aspects that remained unknown because of lack of knowledge or simply because they were kept hidden. There were numerous things

that I learned during the length of this project and that is when it struck me that if for me, being a graduate student with access to resources, these findings were new, then what about women who lack these resources and also are challenged by class dynamics? The answer was rather simple; they relied on what was told, and they were never given a chance to present an opposing argument or to speak for themselves. I know this because, despite my understanding of the marriage contract and the religious rules surrounding it, I was denied some of the rights.

With the knowledge of different facets of the marriage contract fresh in my mind, I told my mother that I would like to keep my right to divorce. It is important to inform a family member earlier so that the concerned Imam (representative of a religious authority who certifies the marriage contract) does not cancel out the section regarding women's rights which is the norm. In my way, I tried to retaliate against this norm, and I thought beginning with my marriage would set a good example. Upon hearing my demand, my mother's sharp look told me that I was committing blasphemy and for a moment I believed that too. Her response was cold and detached, "I don't want you to contaminate your mind with these thoughts. Do not engage with what is not possible." With this the conversation ended, never to be brought up again. This incident immediately took me back to what my Amma said once. She said, "All my life I have accepted what my protectors (read men) imposed on me even in matters of religion. I could never say no. Acceptance was the only way for me. I pray that you live a different life, Mahnoor." I was chasing that different life but how could I go against my mother? This is when I realized that resistance would be extremely complicated. I

cannot simply put a statement out by placing a clause in my marriage contract. It goes way beyond what I can see.

Throughout these years many questions remained unanswered regarding my position as a woman in life but there were two themes that I was certain I needed to engage with: patriarchy and women. This dissertation is an attempt to understand the relation between the two and the way they impact each other. This dissertation suggests that patriarchy has controlled and marginalized women by manipulating religious notions concerning women (such as honour, chastity, and the sanctity of the female body) and by adding new meanings to the traditional concepts of marriage and motherhood through patriarchal exploitation of traditional roles of women making these roles oppressive and confining. The objective of this dissertation is to analyze the impact of patriarchal equilibrium on the lives of women, as represented in postcolonial literature, particularly through the patriarchal manipulation of religion and the patriarchal shifting of the meaning of motherhood and marriage. I suggest that through the process of patriarchal manipulation and exploitation of religious and traditional norms, patriarchy creates a female victim and marginalizes it while maintaining patriarchal equilibrium. The dissertation will explore these concepts on two levels: Firstly, on a political level, by revisiting the time of partition of the subcontinent to explore the way patriarchy uses religion as a means of possessing and/or controlling women's bodies. Secondly, on a domestic and personal level by exploring the themes of motherhood, marriage, and female subjectivity to portray the negative impact of patriarchal innovations of traditional values on the lives of women. This analysis provides the groundwork for moving

towards an important aspect of this dissertation: the examination of the evolution of patriarchal control over women through contemporary examples, exploring themes such as female genital mutilation, honour killings, and widow immolation.

The focus on religious manipulation is a major aspect of this dissertation since it will highlight the patriarchal influence on religious laws that results in changing the definitions of marriage and motherhood and also reducing the female figure to an object vulnerable to various forms of control and oppression. One such example is the matter concerning the right of divorce given to women in Islam which is a bone of contention in Pakistani society and can help understand the discrepancy between religious laws and their manipulation. While Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, women in the country rarely enjoy their religious rights and are prone to patriarchal interpretations of religion that place them at a position of disadvantage. According to Islam and the marriage contract that is structured keeping Islamic laws in view, women can retain the right to seek divorce from their husbands. Religious clerics in Pakistan, however, while getting the document ready for signatures cancel the clause out completely so that it does not hold any significance. This elimination suggests two things; the overriding of divine law by religious clerics (read patriarchy) by reinterpreting the document to undermine the divorce clause, and the idea that religious laws are open to patriarchal interpretation. Secondly, it highlights the injustice against women by patriarchy that uses religion as a source of subjugation. By taking away their right to divorce, religious scholars are not merely tampering with the religious laws but in doing so they are also marginalizing the female subject. This dissertation aims to present an analysis similar to that

of the divorce clause. Similar to the idea of religious manipulation in the case of divorce laws that favor our male counterparts, this dissertation suggests that patriarchy manipulates and exploits religion to marginalize and control women with the aim of othering them. Due to this, women are not only excluded from the actual debate in which they are directly involved but also become victims of unreasonable religious and traditional standards.

The dissertation will analyze the marginalization of women by patriarchal manipulation of religion and patriarchal exploitation of traditional roles of women as well as the development of female agency in response to different forms of patriarchal control. To this end, this dissertation will look at the oppressive hold of patriarchy in the lives of women by focusing on the partition of the subcontinent – a time of political upheaval – when the female body became a site of religious struggle and the patriarchal understanding of religious notion's such as honour and chastity became synonymous with the female body. Apart from this, the patriarchal desire to control women penetrated the definition of the traditional role of women as wives and mothers. While the dissertation examines these ideas in retrospect, the purpose is to search for the presence of female agency and voice that can be seen as a form of resistance to patriarchal control. Along with tracing different forms of patriarchal control, the dissertation aims to look for pockets of narratives that place the female figure at the center despite their constant marginalization by patriarchy. While patriarchal manipulation of religion and patriarchal innovation to the traditional role of women serve as two facets of this work, a third will look into the contemporary position of women between evolving patriarchal control and the Western politicization of religion which mirrors similar structures

of control that patriarchy implements. The purpose here is to see the changing dynamics of control over women and the way they offer resistance to it in the form of developing a third space of their own. The dissertation will focus on postcolonial literary texts from Pakistan and India that explore the theme of partition (1947) focusing specifically on the association of honour with the female body, honour killing, and widow immolation. Along with this, postcolonial literary texts from Africa (Nigeria and Egypt) focus on the theme of traditional roles of women exploring the institution of marriage and motherhood and female genital mutilation.

It is important to point out here that this dissertation is not a debate about religion. Rather it discusses and explores those intersecting moments where patriarchal influence over religion intersects with the lives of women and leaves its mark. These intersecting moments can be in a variety of forms such as the effect of religious interpretation and its implementation on the lives of women, the politicization of religions, and the amalgamation of traditional belief with religious values.

This dissertation is divided into three sections with the first two sections including postcolonial literary texts and the third section focusing on news media. The first section deals with the tales of partition focusing particularly on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, Shauna Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*, and Manto's short stories ('Open it!', 'Sharifan' and 'Mozelle'). The second section focuses on themes of domesticity and women's traditional roles through the analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The

common thread that binds these texts together is patriarchal oppression across cultures manifested either through manipulation of religion and/or exploitation of traditional roles of women. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist, Nnu Ego searches for the answer to the question of what she has gained from being a mother. In a moment of self-reflection, Nnu Ego says:

I am a prisoner of my flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband---and now I have to include my sons ... Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. (Emecheta 247).

Through the analysis of postcolonial novels, this dissertation aims to trace those moments in women's lives where patriarchal values and the standards set by men marginalize women. Nnu Ego's predicament highlights the dilemma of many other women who are bound by patriarchal standards. Although the dominant feeling in Nnu Ego's statement is that of frustration, entrapment, and loss, she also conveys hope by hinting that women need to challenge the patriarchal narrative to make space for themselves. While this dissertation examines the patriarchal narrative of oppression, it also looks for women's mini-narratives that depict hope. Each of these texts portrays distinct historical and cultural settings but they converge in their presentation of patriarchal systems that marginalize women. These culturally and historically diverse novels allow me to examine the way patriarchy engages

with different social and traditional structures to develop a system of oppression that confines women within their bodies or their roles as mothers and wives. While these novels present historical narratives (such as the time of partition and the colonial era), the patriarchal forms of oppression highlighted in these texts also resonate with contemporary issues such as female genital mutilation, honour killing, and widow immolation. This dual focus helps in drawing connections between the historical and the contemporary emphasizing patriarchy's adaptable, persistent, and evolving nature.

1. Methodology

1.1 Standpoint Theory

This dissertation will include literary texts to explore patriarchal control over women through religion by scrutinizing the partition of the subcontinent, the patriarchal definitions of women in traditional roles (as mothers and wives), and the media depiction of religio-political atmosphere globally focusing mainly on Islam. This section will explain the specifics of my primary methodology, standpoint theory, beginning with an overview of what the theory denotes.

Standpoint theory surfaced from Marxist theories and debates about identity politics. Its goal, as explained in the *Feminist Theory Reader* (2016) is to, “develop a feminist epistemology, or theory of knowledge, that delineates a method for constructing effective knowledge from the insights of women's experiences” (McCann and Kim 582). Standpoint here means a position that allows the female subject to observe social contexts, where

dominant narratives function, by being marginally involved. Standpoint is not a position that one is born with or a statement of one's viewpoints; rather "standpoint is earned and achieved by intellectual reflection on and political engagement with one's position in society in relation to others' positions" (John 96). Moreover, a standpoint also results from the awareness of one's position within the social and political environment which depicts the way individual experiences are shaped by these structures creating standpoints that can be "both individual and collective" (John 96). Proponents of standpoint theory such as Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Sandra Harding maintain that certain social and political roles held by women can serve as sources of unique knowledge and valuable perspectives. As a result, these positions become effective means of giving insight into politically and socially marginalized people. Along with this, these positions also expose those who end up perpetuating oppression because of their privileged positions (Bowell). The aim of standpoint theory is to consider power relations in connection to knowledge construction that helps in understanding group-based experiences. Collins (1997) highlights two major features of standpoint theory. The first one is that "the notion of standpoint refers to groups having shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power" (376). Secondly, Collins specifies the importance of power relations and the aspect of commonality by mentioning that "standpoint theory argues that groups who share common placement in hierarchical power relations also share common experiences in such power relations" (377).

This dissertation uses standpoint theory's notion of 'common placement in hierarchical power relations' and tests it through the examination of women's experiences across the subcontinent and African contexts. By drawing on their shared positioning within

patriarchal structures, this analysis highlights how their marginalization operates similarly across different historical and cultural settings, reinforcing the argument that patriarchy systematically manipulates women's lower hierarchical status to sustain control. By considering power relations and the role of knowledge production, I intend to explore the influence of manipulated religion and patriarchally influenced traditions (both being products of patriarchal knowledge production) on the lives of women and the way women negotiate a space for themselves. Analyzing the female characters in literary texts will uncover those aspects that allow a better understanding of the relationship between women and the forms of patriarchal control they experience.

This dissertation employs standpoint theory in multiple dimensions to analyze how characters navigate and respond to patriarchal structures. Firstly, some characters in the selected texts achieve a standpoint through a conscious understanding of their marginalization and actively rebel against or seek to reshape the dominant patriarchal narratives. Sadat Hasan Manto presents one such character named Mozelle. During the chaotic days of partition, Mozelle, a Jewish girl, saves a Sikh girl, Kirpal Kaur, from a Muslim mob. By putting herself in front of the mob, Mozelle creates space for Kirpal to walk free. In doing so she inverts the patriarchal narrative of religious honour that places honour within the female body. Mozelle's act of rebellion saves a life as opposed to the patriarchal version of taking women's lives during the bloody days of partition. Such characters challenge systemic oppression, embodying a transformative agency that reflects a critical awareness of their socio-political realities. Secondly, other characters recognize these oppressive structures but remain passive or constrained by their circumstances, unable or

unwilling to challenge the status quo despite their understanding such as Buchi Emecheta's Nnu Ego. These figures offer a more nuanced reflection on the complexities of marginalization, where agency is limited by internal or external factors. Additionally, there are characters whose voices are silenced, either through literal death or silence, representing the most extreme form of marginalization. These silenced characters highlight the absence of agency, yet their silence itself becomes a site of critical analysis. As a critic, I too occupy a standpoint in this dissertation by engaging with these diverse representations of marginalization and agency. Through my analysis, I seek to uncover and give voice to the silenced and overlooked, positioning myself as an observer and interpreter of the various ways in which women navigate their positionalities within patriarchal and colonial frameworks.

Some aspects of standpoint theory are particularly helpful in this research such as the analysis of the 'other'. Standpoint theory has played an important role in looking at perspectives from the lens of the 'other'. This 'other' can be any marginalized individual/group that can offer a unique approach towards social factors at work that create hierarchies. The scholars (Lenz 2004) working with the theme of standpoint theory argue that marginalized individuals tend to be less interested in maintaining the status quo "and occupy a unique position from which to view the culture from which they are marginalized" (98). These theorists argue that standpoint denotes the *understanding* of the experience rather than the experience or perspective itself – "that is, a standpoint is an intellectual achievement that reflects political consciousness" (98).

Standpoint therefore holds a similar position to that of the ‘other’ from the self/other binary making it a suitable method of analysis. Since the ‘other’ is not actively engaged in dominant narratives when it comes to defining and interpreting, its position remains in flux. Similarly, a standpoint offers flexibility in its perspective and allows “dynamic negotiation of experience and point of view that can be temporarily stabilized in order to interrogate dominant ideologies” (Lenz 98). According to the theory, the concept of standpoint is like that of the “outsider within” (99). The ‘outsider within’ refers to the groups or individuals that “are included in dominant cultural practices but are nevertheless, and for various reasons, unable to fully participate in them” (99). Standpoint theory can help us understand women's experiences by seeing them as the ‘outsider within’; a position that allows them to analyze dominant narratives while being marginally involved. It recognizes that women's experiences are shaped by their social positions, which are often different from those of men, and this facilitates the process of othering. The protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus, is one such character who remains an outsider within the patriarchal structure that defines her life. Firdaus lives her life according to the systems created by men in her life: her father, uncle, husband, and at the end, her pimp. Throughout her life, Firdaus resides at the periphery while men take center stage in creating knowledge (such as defining religion and the role of women) that influences Firdaus’ life. Although an outsider, Firdaus quickly learns that men maintain a façade of religiosity that allows them to control Firdaus by manipulating religion. As a result, Firdaus occupies the position of the ‘other’ – a position to which she is constantly pushed by patriarchal figures.

Another way that standpoint theory can help us understand women's experiences is by challenging the idea of objectivity in connection to knowledge production. According to this theory, knowledge is not objective but is instead shaped by the social position of the knower. Because women occupy a different social position than men, their experiences and perspectives are different, and this can help us to understand the limitations imposed and the manipulation of knowledge by dominant groups. Caresse A. John (2011) explains that “standpoint theorists generally claim that knowledge is socially constructed and, therefore, our positions in society produce understandings of the world similar to *and* different from the understandings of others” (emphasis original 95). Because knowledge is constructed, the experiences of women are influenced by patriarchally constructed knowledge. The literary analysis of texts will allow me to examine the patriarchal construction of knowledge (such as the patriarchal definition of motherhood and marriage) that defines the context for women forcing them towards the periphery. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the institution of marriage is a patriarchal construction that allows room for its exploitation by men. Since motherhood is defined by men, it is structured in a way that benefits men. Although to be a mother is Nnu Ego’s earnest desire, after producing five children and looking after them on her own, Nnu Ego (inwardly) questions the patriarchal construction of motherhood that enables men to construct the institution of motherhood pushing women to the periphery.

Standpoint theory can also help us understand women's experiences by highlighting the importance of context. This theory recognizes that knowledge is always situated in a particular context and that understanding this context is essential to understanding the knowledge itself. For example, when studying women's experiences, it is essential to

consider the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which they live. This can include factors such as access to education and healthcare, workplace discrimination, and societal attitudes towards women. In the case of this dissertation context would include patriarchal, political, and traditional influences in the lives of women along with class differences. Contextualizing the production of patriarchal knowledge is important since it will expose those loopholes where the dominant narrative is shifted by the producers of that knowledge (in the scope of this dissertation men are considered the producers of knowledge). The patriarchal manipulation of religious traditions such as marriage, and the patriarchal innovations to the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers that are structured to marginalize women, will be traced by focusing on the context of knowledge production. The literary analysis will examine the position of men as authoritative figures in the household; a position that pushes women to the periphery while burdening them with patriarchal knowledge.

While the theory itself can be considered a reasonable medium for understanding marginalized perspectives and subservient positions, there is also some critique when the theory is tried in connection to women's experiences. Theorists have argued that standpoint denotes a "group-based" position rather than individual experiences (Collins 2000, 43). While this approach might work in some cases, such as focusing on socio-economic differences, in the case of gender difference, one cannot trace a single type of standpoint and analyze it as a representative of a whole since experiences cannot be universalized, an idea explored at length by Chandra Mohanty. Susan Hekman (2000) also addresses the need for

multiple standpoints that would cater to “multiple truths and multiple realities” (19). There are also concerns related to the race-based approach of standpoint theory. Nancy Hirschman (2004) explains that “feminists of colour are particularly critical of the way that standpoint's universalist potential has been unwittingly promoted by White feminists” (320). Despite the critique, standpoint theory still provides an optimum framework for understanding the influence of patriarchal knowledge in the lives of women and women’s subsequent perspective that allow them to occupy a unique position.

Feminist standpoint theory allows the one objectified to be the subject in presenting its perspective of the hierarchy it is a part of. Lenz (2004) explains that

Standpoint theory can, I think, encourage the interrogation of rigid categorizations by confronting and questioning both highly individualistic and broadly essentialist claims, both of which discourage communication and solidarity among women who are differently situated. Though it does begin with the perspectives of marginalized peoples, standpoint theory acknowledges that individual experiences, and the interpretations of those experiences, vary among members of any social group.

Likewise, standpoint theory recognizes that such variations, rather than mitigating the possibility for wider application, in fact deepen and strengthen our understanding of the positions at which various forms of oppression intersect (100).

Standpoint theory remains successful in providing a formula for approaching metanarratives (social, political, religious, traditional) that allows the excavation of various pockets of submerged narratives. By recognizing the limitations of dominant knowledge production and

valuing the unique standpoints of women, this theory can help us gain a comprehensive understanding of the social structures that shape our world. Rather than using it as a prescriptive framework for understanding women's experiences, standpoint theory can be used as a tool for understanding and challenging the metanarratives that tend to marginalize the experiences of women. This dissertation aims to challenge these narratives by looking at the standpoints achieved by the characters/authors of the novels that result in the formation of a third space for the female subject.

1.2 Intersectionality

The aspect of intersectionality is undoubtedly an important feature of postcolonial feminism. It is one of the ways that allows one to look at various narratives in conjunction with each other. This combining of narratives is important since gender struggles cannot be understood in isolation from socio-political and class influences. In their book, *Intersectionality* (2016), Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge explain that intersectionality helps in understanding and accessing the complexities of humans and their experiences. Collins and Bilge highlight that socio-political life is not affected and shaped by a single factor; rather it is the complex relation of multiple and diverse factors that influence one another. In matters of inequality, “people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (16). Therefore, intersectionality can be seen “as an analytic tool” that allows a better

understanding of complexities that influence people's lives and the world they are a part of (Collins and Bilge 16).

By looking at these varieties of influences that shape the lives of individuals, an intersectional approach will pave the way for examining various forms of patriarchal controls and the way they function. Since patriarchy creates power structures that marginalize women, an intersectional approach will offer “a way of thinking about (female) identity and its relationship to (patriarchal) power” as stated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in a Washington Post article titled “Why Intersectionality Can't Wait” (2015). Wendy Wright in her book review for *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (2017) explains that any analytical tool that would consider only a single aspect of an individual's identity would not be able to include individuals who are oppressed or marginalized on multiple levels. For example, an analysis of gender would exclude people who experience oppression based on gender *and* race. Intersectionality, therefore, caters to such a multiplicity of influencing factors (349).

In the case of women and their marginalized status, an intersectional approach will help in analyzing patriarchy's association with religion and tradition which results in developing a constrictive space for women. It is pertinent to mention here that intersectionality is closely linked with the formation of mini-narratives. When certain ideas and subject positions are seen forming connections with multiple dominant narratives, these connections will create new mini-narratives. This dissertation classifies patriarchal oppression as a dominant narrative or a metanarrative. The intersection of patriarchy with

other narratives such as religion, traditional values, and/or gender, will bring forth newer (newly created) dimensions of the dominant narrative.

This section will deal with intersections between dominant narratives that offer a way to see intimate and nuanced subject positions resulting in subject formation and its fluctuations. By explaining the role of intersectionality in subject formation, this dissertation will highlight the interaction of patriarchy with gender-related themes such as body politics, motherhood, and marriage. With these intersections in view, the dissertation will analyze the association of honour with the female body and the institutionalization of marriage and motherhood to have a nuanced understanding of women's experiences when various factors are at play such as patriarchy, religion, tradition, the female body, politics of marriage and motherhood. An example of the application of an intersectional framework in this dissertation can be seen through the analysis of gender-based violence during partition. Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* portrays the harrowing details of partition. One powerful scene that dominates the text is the death of Kusum, a Sikh woman and a mother of two. As soon as the riots begin, Kusum is expected to sacrifice herself to save the religious honour of the family. Kusum's death presents the reader with the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and honour. Seeing religious honour as a patriarchal construction, Kusum's death symbolizes the intersection of patriarchy with religion shaping a patriarchal religious discourse that marginalizes and ultimately silences women. Kusum, therefore, is not a victim of patriarchy or religion functioning as isolated factors rather it is the intersection of both, that forces Kusum to die.

Another example of an intersectional framework is the examination of the complexity in the lives of women in their traditional roles as mothers and wives. The roles are well-defined for women as per social and religious paradigms. Patriarchal influences over traditional roles of women made the institution of motherhood complicated by setting unrealistic standards for women as we will see in the case of Nnu Ego – the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The patriarchal definition of motherhood – seen as an intersection of patriarchy and tradition – demanded ultimate sacrifice from Nnu Ego in terms of fulfilling her role as a mother. Along with the burden of producing male children, Nnu Ego also had to fulfill her husband’s role during situations of financial distress. Similarly, the intersection of patriarchy with tradition in the case of marriage placed Firdaus at the mercy of her selfish uncle and ruthless husband. For them, Firdaus served as a female body that could be used for dowry and sexual gratification. Moreover, these confining definitions of motherhood and marriage equated a woman’s role to that of a wife and a mother and eliminated all other aspects of her subjectivity. Additionally, the role of patriarchy in redefining these definitions plays a crucial role in producing a form of knowledge that marginalizes and subjugates women.

In the construction of knowledge power politics play an important role. Patricia Hill Collins in *Intersectionality* (2016) explains that the intersectional framework views power dynamics as mutually dependent. This means that people’s identities and lives are influenced and shaped by multiple factors that are facilitating each other. Along with this, various factors such as race, gender, class, age, etc. form mutually dependent and “intersecting

systems of power” (46). In the case of traditional roles of women (mother and wife), patriarchy would not function as a sole actor; rather, it is its association with religious traditions that paves the way for a patriarchal exploitation of religious and traditional values. It is a mutual dependency that asserts a form of control. Motherhood as a result would involve the religious constraints of being a mother as implemented by patriarchy. The result of such power dynamics becomes more challenging when men are the producers of knowledge. This adds another layer that the intersectional framework will consider in the scope of this dissertation. The experiences of women become challenging because knowledge is produced with a patriarchal approach and religion becomes modified to suit patriarchal purposes. It is important to note here that this dissertation acknowledges the representational complexity involved in analyzing male figures as producers of knowledge when they are mediated through the fictional constructions of female authors. The analysis does not treat these male characters as direct reflections of historical men, but rather as narrative devices through which patriarchal authority is critiqued and made visible. Female authors such as Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi, and Bapsi Sidhwa depict male characters – fathers, husbands, religious leaders, and colonial figures – who occupy positions of epistemic authority, determining what is seen as truth, morality, or tradition. These representations are not neutral; they are shaped by the authors’ critical perspectives on how male-dominated structures define and enforce knowledge systems that marginalize women. In this sense, the male characters function as embodiments of broader systems of power, and the act of portraying them through fiction becomes a feminist intervention – reclaiming

narrative control and exposing the mechanisms through which gendered knowledge is constructed and imposed.

Engaging with the discourse of patriarchal control as an important influencer in the lives of women, the theory of intersectionality provides an optimum framework to excavate various intersecting narratives that highlight the marginalization of women under the banner of religion and the resistance that women display in the face of such oppressive power structures. An example that would help us understand the complexity of women's experiences involving an intersectional approach is the Shaheen Bagh protest in India in December 2019.

In December 2019, Muslim women in Delhi staged a protest at Shaheen Bagh against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). According to this law, enacted in 2019 “the CAA removes barriers for acquiring Indian citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India on or before 31 December 2014” (Amnesty International 2024). This meant that people from these minorities would be able to get Indian citizenship without any hurdles. The problem with the law that motivated the protest was that there was no mention of Muslim refugees such as Myanmar Muslims and Rohingya Muslims. Because of this law “many other groups in South Asia region such as Rohingya Muslims, Sri Lankan Tamils, Bhutanese, Hazaras, Shias and Ahmadiyyas face exclusion without justification by the discriminatory 2019 amendment” (AI 2024). Adding fuel to the fire was the Finance Minister's (Anurag Thakur) and a Parliament member's (Paresh Verma) severe response to

the peaceful protestors who said that these were the “Muslims who want to take over India” and “Shoot the traitors” (*Aljazeera* 2020). With this political atmosphere, there was widespread fear that this law would prevent Muslims from having Indian citizenship and because of the blatant exclusion of Muslims, the law was seen as “anti-Muslim” by Muslim women in India (*Aljazeera* 2020). In this entangled struggle of politics and religion entered Muslim grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh staging a sit-in in protest of the law. The resistance to the law was a “nonviolent movement of protest that originated with the ‘grandmothers’ of a Muslim neighborhood by the name of Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi” (Lal 2). Vinay Lal in his 2023 article titled “The Grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh: An Indian Muslim Women’s Protest and the Future of Satyagraha” explains that the protest “was initiated by semi-literate Muslim women” who were mothers and grandmothers. A majority of these women had limited themselves to their homes and therefore had no leadership experience. Lal highlights that despite their dominant domestic role, these women managed to stage a nonviolent protest in the face of state oppression while also raising “critical questions about citizenship, the forms that dissent might take in a democratic polity, and the vexed question of both rights and ‘belonging’ in the modern nation-state” (2).

The protesting Muslim women were joined by Muslim students from Jamia Millia Islamia University in a display of peaceful protest that displayed agency on the part of these women. Facing the violent government supporters, the protesting Muslims replied from “a few yards away, [with] a banner placed in the middle of the road, which connects New Delhi to the satellite city of Noida, [that] read: ‘Aao baithen, baat karen (come, let’s talk)’”

(*Aljazeera* 2020). The grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh rose to fame as the initiators of this protest. They challenged the political power exerted by the state that used religion as a means of excluding Muslims from citizenship laws. This display of agency played a dual role for Muslim women: one, it showed their involvement in the intersection of politics, religion, and gender as mothers and wives invoking their traditional roles and presenting their relevance in the narrative of religion and politics. Alisha Ibkar in her article “Protest and Serve: The Grandmothers Dishing up Care as Political Expression in India” (2023) explains that the presence of elderly women also brought their values to the site of protest. Among these values what dominated were “their (grand)mothering instincts, care, empathy, and resilience, adding to the larger discourse on citizenship the assertion that one’s claim to a nation is built on the nurturing and caring experience of life, and not stamped pieces of paper”. The protest by these grandmothers also marked the fight for their children’s citizenship more than their own. An eighty-two-year-old grandmother, Bilkis Bano says “Even if I died, I want to make sure that our children remained sure of a future as equal citizens of India” (Ibkar).

Secondly, it challenged the anti-Muslim notions of an oppressed woman. Jaclyn A. Michael in the article “The Role of Performance in Constructing Muslim Citizenship in the 2019–20 Anti-CAA Protests” (2024) explains that the Shaheen Bagh protests depicting visible female leadership have inverted the anti-Muslim argument that Muslim women are oppressed. With a majority of older and working-class Muslim women leading the protest, the Shaheen Bagh incident challenged the anti-Muslim and Islamophobic sentiments in which Muslim women “used the public platform they created to be the leading voices

demanding equal rights for their religious community” (229-30). Muslim women placed at the intersection here not only highlight politics and religion-related complexities in their lives but also lay bare problems that arise with their traditional roles in the domestic sphere that mirror the same marginalization of women through manipulated religion. The presence of grandmothers brought the element of domesticity with them to the politically charged environment. Michael (2024) further explains that Muslim women depicted the intersectional nature of identities while calling “for recognition of their fundamental humanity as Muslim women and criticized patriarchal attitudes and institutions such as misogyny and the problem of domestic violence” (230). The protest, which was led predominantly by women portrayed the intersection of various discourses in connection with the identity of a Muslim woman. The protest went beyond a mere sit-in against citizenship law and saw “women [holding] signs with slogans calling attention to the problems of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment” (Michael 232). A classic depiction of politics, religion, domesticity, and patriarchy at play, this case highlights the intersection of these dominant narratives that show the changing subject positions and display of agency on the part of women.

The intersection of politics and religion has played its role in changing the map of the world. The partition of the subcontinent divided India into Hindu-majority and a Muslim-majority states. However, what was meant to be a past event still insists on deepening the divide in the name of religion. While the Shaheen Bagh incident tells the tale of Muslim women’s agency, it also highlights the tendency of women to be marginalized. Anjali

Bhardwaj Datta in her article “Nation and Its ‘Other’ Women: Muslim Subjectivity and Gendered Agency in Delhi” (2021) examines the position of women “within the context of social, cultural, economic and political changes after Partition” (380). Focused on the manner of asserting agency by Muslim women, Datta’s article also shows a different perspective resulting from the intersection of politics, religion, and gender. Talking about the December 2019 sit-in, Datta explains that it is important to know who the women of Shaheen Bagh were;

They were the women (or women from families) who were driven out of their homes during the horrors of the September 1947 Partition violence in Delhi. Nevertheless, despite what had happened, for various reasons, they had made the difficult decision not to move. Since then, the community has been subject to the politics of fear and suspicion on account of religion, but women have been made more invisible due to their gender (381).

By looking at the intersection of patriarchy, gender, and domesticity this work aims to trace how patriarchally manipulated religion may be a marginalizing force, especially concerning women’s experiences. To have a nuanced understanding of women’s experiences and the impact of the oppressive hold of patriarchy in their lives, it is important to consider the intersection of patriarchal knowledge production in connection to religion and traditional definitions of motherhood and marriage.

Looking at the intersection of ‘patriarchy and ‘women’ as analytic categories allows the unfolding of accounts that place women at a position of disadvantage. This analysis will

direct attention toward understanding the consequences of patriarchal influence on religion in the lives of women in the political and domestic sphere.

2. Literature Review – Why Revisiting Patriarchy?

When examining women's experiences, the influence of men in the patriarchal structure cannot be overlooked, as their pervasive role has been instrumental in shaping and reinforcing gender roles. The revisitation of historical periods, (such as partition and colonization) that depict a transition in the political and social structure, and analyzing them by acknowledging patriarchy as a source of oppression, as Joan W. Scott (1986) puts it, “we must ask more often how things happened in order to find out why they happened” (1067). Scott's essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," (1986) argues that the usage of gender as an analytic category is vital because it transforms the way history and other social sciences interpret and understand human experiences. Scott insists that gender is not simply a substitute for women, but a more profound tool for analyzing relationships of power, ideas, institutions, and social structures. She underscores that gender is historically and culturally constructed and that it shapes not only individual identity but also broader social processes. Scott maintains that “gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” such as patriarchy’s engagement with other forms of narrative to establish control over women (1069). Scott suggests that although gender is not the only field through which power is maintained and constructed, it seems to be a dominant and persistent force with the connotation of power in various religious (such as Islamic and Judeo-Christian) as well as Western traditions (1069).

In analyzing historical moments of political upheaval by centralizing women's experiences, this dissertation will reveal the patriarchal dynamics of control while also exposing the way women offered resistance and negotiated a way for themselves. The objective behind revisiting patriarchy is to compare the historical systems of control with the current and modified versions that tend to play a similar role of subordinating and marginalizing women. While women attempt to negotiate with patriarchal systems of control, power rarely shifts in their favor. Scott raises an important question here: "If significations of gender and power construct one another, how do things change?" (1073). In answering this Scott explains that political turmoil and massive upheavals have the tendency to bring about change by "throw[ing] old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being" and in doing so it "may revise the terms (and so the organization) of gender" (1073). While the development of a new order is one of the possibilities for bringing about change, it is also true that "old notions of gender have also served to validate new regimes" (1073-74). This presents the crux of this dissertation. The forms of patriarchal control analyzed in this work begin with a focus on times of political chaos. In these times, patriarchal oppression against women had a strong and profound hold that placed women in a confining version of womanhood. Through a revisitation of prior forms of patriarchal control, the dissertation seeks an answer to the following question: While there are instances of women's resistance to oppression and marginalization, does that change their marginalized status or, as Scott explains, does patriarchal control also adapt to the changed circumstances?

This dissertation will look at the intersection of patriarchy with the female figure to study the oppression of the female body, patriarchy's constrictive definition of motherhood and marriage, and its constant control over female subjectivity. While patriarchy has long been studied as a means of oppression and some might argue that women are relatively free from its holds today, this study speaks to its continuous presence in today's world and its adaptation to newer versions of control. This section will speak to patriarchy's evolving nature by highlighting the presence of a patriarchal system of oppression in the domestic sphere of women's lives.

Many scholars have attempted to define patriarchy in connection to the particular form of oppression they explore. Focusing on the dominance of patriarchy within the household, Valentine Moghadam – in the article “Patriarchy and the Politics of Gender in Modernising Societies” (1992) – describes patriarchy as “a kinship-ordered social structure with strictly defined sex roles in which women are subordinated to men” (35). In a system where patriarchy operates through the familial and domestic structure, it creates, as Nadia Agha explains in her book *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan* (2021), “a system where men dominate women, older men dominate younger men, where descent is traced through men and property and assets are transferred through them” (14). Such domination usually functions when men are the head of the family and being in a position of power, they tend to define domestic roles for their women. Because knowledge is produced by the male authority, women remain at the periphery of the power structure. Allan Johnson in his book *The Gender Knot: Unraveling*

Our Patriarchal Legacy (2014) explains that “because patriarchy is male-identified and male-centered, women and the work they do tend to be devalued, if not made invisible” (16). The vicious cycle of control and oppression tends to keep women in a subordinated position through ways created by patriarchy and its manipulation of social structures that intersect with women’s lives. Talking about the prevalence of gender inequality, L. Amede Obiora in the chapter “The Past before Us: Reimagining Patriarchy and Gender in Africa” (2021) explains that despite visible global efforts to achieve gender equality, “patriarchal discrimination remains endemic in the social fabric and at every level of the political landscape” (13). Although states are working towards “the promise of gender equality”, none has achieved it, leaving gender equality a far cry (13). This denotes the continuous presence of power structures that control and subjugate women, and these power structures can be placed under the umbrella term “patriarchy”. While patriarchy functions in various forms, this dissertation will focus on the patriarchal exploitation of religion and women’s traditional roles in the domestic sphere. Veronica Fynn Bruey in her book *Patriarchy and Gender in Africa* (2021) explains that “the system of patriarchy is characterized by the institutionalization of male power as an instrument of male domination and female subordination in society” (24). Religion and traditional roles are a part of societal norms. If patriarchy dictates the power structure in a society, it tends to influence the majority, if not all, aspects of societal norms that intersect with women’s lives.

In most African and South Asian societies, gender roles are specified that set the stage for male domination and control over women. For example, as M.I.E Evwierhoma in

the chapter “Scripting Women into the Mainstream?” (2007) states that “[i]n many African societies, motherhood defines womanhood” (318). The association of one aspect of a woman’s life with her identity, not only makes a woman’s identity reductive but also paves the way for unnecessary and unrealistic demands from women in connection to that role. This reductive identity of women is also highlighted by Sally Haslanger in her book *Resisting Reality* (2012) when she suggests that “roughly, women are those subordinated in a society due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities. It follows that in those societies where being (or presumed to be) female does not result in subordination along any dimension, there are no women” (Haslanger 8). Along with reducing women to a particular role, the association of women with their reproductive role creates gaps for patriarchal structures to operate.

This dissertation focuses on the idea of burdening the woman by patriarchally manipulating her traditional roles and innovating religious traditions to suit patriarchal purposes. In other words, this dissertation suggests that patriarchy, through its association with traditions and religion, develops a system of oppression in which it creates a female victim by exploiting and manipulating women’s identity. Although traditional roles of women as wives and mothers can be taxing, patriarchy manipulates women’s position in these roles to further marginalize and burden women by setting unrealistic standards. In some cases, these traditional roles are already patriarchal (such as in South Asian cultures) whereas in others these roles are patriarchally innovated and eventually exploited by patriarchy creating a constrictive space for women. While patriarchally defined traditional roles place

women at a position of disadvantage, employment and further engagement with society burden them more. Nadia Agha in her book *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan* (2021) talks about patriarchal privilege and explains that in rural areas of developing countries, men tend to be socially prioritized. Although women are entering the workforce “the division of labour is still the same within the household, which binds women under the double burden of work inside and outside the home. The responsibility for children and elderly persons at home also lies with women” (13). This additional burden placed by patriarchy on women extends the idea of motherhood to financial and economic responsibility as well, forcing women to juggle between their duties as mothers while fulfilling the role of a provider. The traditional role of women as housewives and mothers continues to define them since historical meaning tends to determine present ideologies (Bhandari & Titzmann, 2017; Dutt & Sil, 2014; Dube, 2001).

This study focuses on traditional roles because women often experience patriarchal oppression specifically in their positions as wives and mothers. Marriage and the institution of motherhood have served as rich platforms of patriarchal control over women and their subsequent subordination. In the introductory chapter of *Patriarchy and Gender in Africa*, Veronica Bruey (2021) recounts an incident saying, “When Irene Atenyo, a fruit vendor, confronted her husband about taking a third wife, he beat her ‘like an animal’: he was able to do so with impunity, because judges in Uganda refused a petition to declare polygamy unconstitutional” (3). Here, polygamy can be seen as an idea that extends from the institution of marriage. Irene’s husband exploited the institution of marriage to make a decision that

would undermine Irene's position as his wife. Nadia Agha (2021) explains that "early marriages are common and contribute to men's control over women; domestic violence is widespread and is reinforced by male power" (11). The forms of patriarchal control, therefore, seem to rely on women's identities as wives and mothers to establish a system of power that exploits the institution of marriage and motherhood. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* also depicts a patriarchal version that partly depends on women's subordinate roles. Okonkwo, being the epitome of patriarchal control in Umuofia, is seen keeping his wives under strict control. He frequently beats his women when they fall short of fulfilling their roles as Okonkwo's wives. For example, during the Week of Peace, Okonkwo beats his wife because she fails to prepare his afternoon meal on time. Such instances portray the marginalization of women by exploiting their domestic roles and keeping them in a subordinate position compared to the men in their lives.

While patriarchal exploitation of traditional roles is one of the ways that patriarchal control enacts, manipulation and exploitation of religion is another way through which patriarchal control is manifested. Zahia Smail Salhi's book *Gender and Violence in Islamic Societies* (2013) analyzes forms of violence while paying attention to gender-based violence connected to patriarchy. Salhi comments that "it is a common phenomenon in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region that under the apparel of patriarchal culture and misinterpretations of religion women's human rights are removed and violated" (2). The role of patriarchy and religion's misinterpretation goes hand in hand in creating a system that marginalizes women. In this regard, it is the patriarchal meaning associated with religion that

becomes a means of establishing control over women. Marie Macey, in her study ‘Religion, Male Violence, and the Control of Women’ (1999) argues that “religion can be used by individuals, groups, and societies in a variety of ways; it can serve to oppress or liberate, to comfort or kill. It is an extremely powerful resource which has been intimately involved in the construction of our world” (48). Keeping Macey’s viewpoint in focus, one can say that religion’s tendency to be modified and patriarchy’s desire to gain control over women, together tend to create a lethal cycle of oppression in which women have to deal with a two-edged sword. In highlighting the usage of religious logic to gain control over women, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* presents the forceful removal of Ayah as an example of men using religion to satisfy their personal desires. Although Ice-Candy Man arrives at the Sethi household to remove the *Hindu* Ayah, he uses her religious identity to gain control over Shanta – the woman.

Given the scope of patriarchal control over women’s lives, Ye Liu in the article “Virtues or Talent among Brotherless Daughters” (2024) raises an important question: “Why do women’s bargains fail to achieve gender equality and weaken the foundation of patriarchy?” (178). Liu describes these bargains as “strategies utilising one’s positionality to maximise one’s life opportunities constrained by the system of male dominance” (178). Sally Haslanger describes patriarchy as dependent on “relations of domination” which explains that if one system fails, another takes its place making resistance challenging (41). The need to revisit the patriarchal hold over women, through exploitation of traditional roles and manipulation of religion, is to examine the modified forms of patriarchal control that have

long gripped women and continue to do so. Amede Obiora in the chapter “The Past Before Us: Reimagining Patriarchy and Gender in Africa” (2021) explains that

It is noteworthy to acknowledge Judith Bennett’s articulation of the term, *patriarchal equilibrium*, to denote the idea of patriarchy as continuous-although-changing.

Bennet is critical of an overall assessment of women’s status as getting better or getting worse, instead of considering the possibility that, despite change, shift, and movement, the overall force of patriarchal power might have endured. Therefore, she invokes the concept of equilibrium to capture the considerable patriarchal continuity that persists in the face of dynamic changes, explicating how patriarchal ideology results in outcomes that favor men and characteristics perceived as “male” to counter women’s power gains (26).

Keeping the constant presence of patriarchal modes of control in view, this dissertation suggests that patriarchy has been an oppressive force in women’s lives through its control of knowledge production which redefines traditional roles and manipulates religion. Patriarchal control through these aspects, though not new, has taken precedence in history. Kalwant Bhopal in her book *Gender, ‘Race’ and Patriarchy* (2018) describes patriarchy’s evolution and its reliance on historically justified modes of operation. Bhopal comments that “far from being unchanging, patriarchal domination takes a number of different forms which are the product of particular historical situations” (91). This dissertation relies on the notion that patriarchy as a form of control over women is not simply a thing of the past; rather, it is alive and morphs to suit its purpose at all times. Verena Tandrayen-Ragoobur (2021) suggests that

patriarchy tends to change its form. Therefore, it can penetrate “various institutional structures, societal norms, cultural practices, religious teachings, and negative portrayals of gender roles in the media. It is present at all levels of a society” (65). It is to the omnipresent and living quality of patriarchy that this dissertation speaks.

This dissertation draws upon several key theoretical frameworks to support and form the foundation of its central argument. The primary theories employed include Self/Other Binary, Bhabha’s notion of Third Space, and the concept of mini-narratives each of which provides critical insights to this research. Self/Other binary offers a lens through which to understand the subordination of women, regarding them as the ‘other’, particularly by emphasizing the dynamics of patriarchal dominance. In conjunction, Bhabha’s theory will be utilized to explore the third space, providing a framework to analyze women’s negotiations with different forms of patriarchal control. Finally, the concept of mini-narratives serves as a foundational structure for looking at women’s narratives produced as a result of their engagement with third space or as a response to patriarchal knowledge construction.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Self/Other Binary

The development of binaries plays a crucial role in identity formation by defining roles and setting boundaries. This dissertation acknowledges that patriarchy places men and women in a hierarchical relationship which implies that one has more authority than the other. If we keep subject positions in view, an important question emerges: who has more authority and

how is it exerted? The response to this question would dissect the hierarchical subject positions and present us with a binary; men possess more authority than women and their manipulation/exploitation of religion along with patriarchally defining traditional roles are some of the ways this authority is exerted to control women. An example that portrays this patriarchal authority is presented in the book *Men in Charge?* (2014). Ziba Mir-Hosseini et al. highlights the influence of classical jurists (mainly men) in translating Islamic texts. Talking specifically about the laws of marriage, Mir-Hosseini comments that “for these jurists, men’s superiority and authority over women was a given, legally inviolable; it was in accordance with a conception of justice that accepted slavery and patriarchy, as long as slaves and women were treated fairly” (38). Reliance on the patriarchal view of justice, as explained in Mir-Hosseini’s statement, hinders contextual consideration in terms of translation depicting a lack of regard for nuances. In other words, such translations do not consider the circumstances of gender-related Quranic revelations. Instead, these translations give a patriarchal meaning to the verses by simply considering them at face value. Such an interpretation of the text would be patriarchally inclined giving the impression of forced marginalization of women based on religion. With this marginalization, the presence of binaries becomes dominant where men occupy a place of authority, and women serve as receptors of that authority. As a result, a hierarchy is created between men and women that constantly pushes women to the periphery while men remain at the center. While the Quranic interpretation is one example that depicts the creation of binaries, in a patriarchal system women are vulnerable to various forms of binaries in which they appear marginalized against

the male figure. This section will explore different aspects of the self/other binary because of its relevance to the matter under consideration.

There are various versions of representing the ‘other’ of self/other binary that theorists have presented. My exploration here of some of those versions will help in developing the understanding of the subject position that manifests itself in the male/female analogy explained above where men are in authority and women submit to authority.

Our first form of ‘other’ is the one that is created from a source of opposition where the ‘self’ is defined based on its differentiation from the ‘other’ and vice versa. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1956) explains this phenomenon with respect to gender differences. de Beauvoir explains that “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being” (15). In this case, both the ‘other’ and the ‘self’ are without a definition of their own and identity relies solely on the notion of disparity between the two; what one possesses, the other lacks and that is what formulates the subject and the object. de Beauvoir utilizes this philosophy in analyzing gender formation while defining the male and female.

However, there is an interesting aspect that de Beauvoir raises, that is of the subject defining the ‘other’ while assuming a position of authority. The literary texts analyzed in this dissertation portray the othering of women where women are defined by men in charge. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus’ uncle refuses to send her to university since a woman is not fit for such a role as per male standards. Firdaus’ uncle remarks, “A respected Sheikh and man of religion like myself sending his niece off to mix in the company of men?” (El

Saadawi 47). The distinction drawn by Firdaus' uncle between himself and Firdaus creates a binary of self/other. Firdaus is the 'other' who cannot be placed in roles suitable for the 'self' (read men). In such a case "she is simply what man decrees thus she is called 'the sex'" meaning "that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being" (de Beauvoir 15-16). Through such a categorization the female 'other' "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (16). The 'other' in this case does not possess a voice of its own and its presence is only acknowledged as an inferior being placed at a lower stratum of hierarchy prepared by the subject. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's perception of the women in his life also depicts the creation of binaries. When questioned by one of his wives about the boy coming to stay at Okonkwo's place, Okonkwo's response reminds his wife about her inferior role: "'Do what you are told, woman,' Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. 'When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?'" (Achebe 4). Okonkwo is quick in refining the boundary between his 'self' and his 'othered' wife. Highlighting the role of both the sexes, de Beauvoir states that "the cleavage of society on the lines of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another" (de Beauvoir 19). Despite the obvious contribution of the two sexes in keeping the existence of humanity intact, one must be the 'other' while the subject becomes the 'self'.

The notion of binary oppositions coming from Saussure's theory of structuralism also sheds light on the role of defining one by relying on the other. In talking about the role of

signs and signifiers in linguistics, Saussure explains that “in language there are only differences. . . a term may be modified . . . solely because a neighbouring term has been modified” (88). In the scope of this dissertation, language construction plays an important role especially when it comes to distinguishing gender roles. Building off from Saussure’s idea of language that modifies the identity of the other, one might think about the lack of language as a source of identity construction on the part of the ‘other’. Language plays a crucial role in the development of identity by giving meaning to abstract concepts and turning them into reality. Saussure (1993) asserts that signs (words, sounds, phonemes, etc.) have no natural connection to reality but are only customary and arbitrary. According to Saussure’s idea, all it “comes down to is the fundamental principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. It is only through the differences between signs that it will be possible to give them a function, a value” (142a). Since signs are arbitrary, the association of meaning with a particular sign would then guide the structure of language and create reality. Saussure asserts that ideas alone and detached from language (*langue*) “is like a kind of shapeless nebula, in which it is impossible to distinguish anything initially” (138a). The same holds for language: “There are no: a) ideas already established and quite distinct from one another, b) signs for these ideas” (137a–138a). The construction of customary meaning of words therefore takes place when meaning is associated with the arbitrary sign. Through this association of meaning with signs, ideas, and ideologies are constructed that shape reality.

In the context of this dissertation, it can be argued that the patriarchal system has control over the customary meaning of words. In the hierarchical relationship between men

and women within the patriarchal setup, language becomes a central character in determining the boundaries between the dominant and submissive, and between the powerful and the weak. Those who have the power to shape language stay at the center, while those on the margins are defined by the language created by the dominant group. An example of patriarchal control over the customary meaning of words is depicted by Mir-Husseini (2014) in her take on the role of linguistics in translation. This analysis is particularly based on the interpretation of a Quranic verse that talks about the roles of men and women in marriage. The Quran uses a specific word *qawwamun* for men which loosely translates to protectors (4:34). Mir-Husseini suggests that the classical juristic interpretation of the word has limited the role of women and has imposed boundaries on the roles of women in Islam. The description of the word *qawwamun* has placed men in a position of authority while suggesting that women are not suitable for that authority and should therefore have a subservient position. The control of language here depicts the formation of self/other binary where the interpreted classical text places men and women in a binary relationship where one assumes a position of authority over the other. Mir-Hosseini explains that the concept of *qiwamah* constructed by jurists in connection to marriage contracts also paved the way for other legal inconsistencies. This means that “women were not qualified to occupy positions that entailed the exercise of authority in society because they were under their husband’s authority and not free agents and they would thus be unable to deliver impartial justice” (41-42). Such an interpretation is not only biased but also constricts the role of women in Islam by taking away authority and control from them. It acts as a man-made law that tends to overwrite divine law. This form of othering is based on associating patriarchal meanings with

traditional and religious signs. We see this in the narrative of partition when women's bodies became sites of religious struggle. The association of religious honour with the female body was a patriarchal construction that allowed Qasim to rape another girl to restore his lost honour in Manto's short story "Sharifan".

Keeping this in view, one can assume that the absence of the ability to shape language, in the case of the female 'other', creates a state of powerlessness that can only be challenged by either creating a loophole in the patriarchal narrative of female subjugation or having the ability to alter the patriarchal discourse. In its analyses of the patriarchal creation of the 'other', this dissertation will look at those moments where the female characters challenge the patriarchal 'self' and alter the discourse by developing an identity of their own by either deviating from the patriarchal definition of traditional roles or challenging the patriarchally influenced religious understanding of womanhood.

The othering of the female figure through patriarchal definitions creates a system of defining women by keeping men at the center. By giving a patriarchal orientation to religious laws and traditional gender roles, men who define the role of women tend to formulate a method of representation that defines women in relation to their male counterparts. Lawrence E. Cahoon in his book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (2003) explains a similar idea that highlights the formation of identity through the element of dependency. Cahoon asserts that identity is "maintained only through *constitutive repression*, an active process of *exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization*" (11). This means that an aspect sustains its identity through signs and symbols "only if other units are represented as foreign

or 'other' through a hierarchical dualism in which the first is *privileged* or favored while the other is *deprivileged* or devalued in some way" (11). Cahoon explains that it is important that the process of othering is subtle and hidden to present the hierarchy as "*inherent* in the nature of the phenomena, rather than a motivated construction" (11). The hidden structures that Cahoon refers to can be observed in the process of interpretation of religion and the sustenance of patriarchally defined traditional gender roles that dictate the prevalence of gender hierarchy. Shauna Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* portrays this othering where women are expected to die for the sake of religious honour. Kusum's death highlights the hidden patriarchal structures at play since her father-in-law does not explicitly ask her to sacrifice herself. Telling the story of Kusum's death to his daughter, Kusum's father-in-law states "I took her into my sitting room and I told her what Sant Puran Singh said we Sikhs must do, and that I had to do it now. She understood. Always she made no trouble" (7793). Kusum was the disposable other in this case and her placement in the binary was well taught by the men in her family.

The othering of women also manifests itself in religion. For example, in Islam, the role of Quranic interpretation is crucial in assigning roles to Muslim men and women. These roles are not merely prescriptive but play an important role in identity formation and the resultant development of self/other narrative. Asma Barlas in her book *Believing Women in Islam* (2019) mentions that

The history of Western civilization should also tell us that there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality, or patriarchy. And yet all three often are justified

by Muslim states and *clerics* in the name of Islam. This recourse to sacred knowledge—or, more accurately, knowledge that claims to derive from religion—justif[ies] sexual oppression and the resulting *misassociation of the sacred with misogyny* (emphasis mine 2).

This manipulative and perhaps forced association of religion with the narrative of female subjugation is dependent on the patriarchal interpretation of the sacred text. This patriarchal reading of the religious traditions creates a system of representation where women are described by clerics who are interpreting the religion for them.

The result emerging from such a practice of describing the ‘other’ (women) through the image of the ‘self’ (men) is that both history and the discourse of identity are manipulated. It is the non-native, the white, the first world, the man representing the native, the black, the third world, the woman in the process of generating a discourse of domination. The need to challenge the politics of representation is crucial for the true depiction of the voiceless (rather silenced) Other. The purpose of this dissertation is to identify and challenge those patriarchal religious readings and traditional definitions of motherhood and marriage that place women at a position of disadvantage. The process of challenging dominant narratives is important to understand the position of women in relation to patriarchal representation. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) states that “the secular world is the world of history as made by human beings. Human agency is subject to investigation and analysis” and this dissertation might help in better understanding the relation of women and patriarchy (Said xxiii).

In differentiating the 'other' from itself, the 'self' or the defining subject also reveals its own identity mainly because of its insistence on separating itself from the 'other'. An example borrowed from Frances B. O'Connor and Becky S. Drury's book *The Female Face in Patriarchy* (1999) will help explain this idea. A woman was conversing with the church's priest and the conversation shifted towards women's role in the church. The woman explained that she was not interested in being a priest and "all [she] want[s] is a little respect" (23). To this, the priest "retorted, 'Why do you think you deserve respect? You're only a woman!'" (23). By reminding the woman of being *only a woman*, the priest not only differentiated himself from her but also used a religious institution to legitimize his claim. In the scope of this dissertation, such a form of separation of self and other reveals the inherently patriarchal nature of the characters and also explains that it is patriarchal influence over religion and traditional values that serve as the source of female subjugation.

In a case of othering, a superior/inferior binary becomes inevitable. The desire to separate the 'other' from the 'self' exposes the hidden structure of patriarchal control that functions to control and oppress women. Edward Said's concept of "othering" in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) refers to the way Western (particularly European) cultures constructed the East (the "Orient") as fundamentally different, inferior, and exotic in comparison to the West (the "Occident"). This process of "othering" involves defining and representing non-Western cultures as irrational, backward, and primitive, thus creating a binary opposition that positions the West as superior, rational, and civilized. Though Said is speaking of the east-west dichotomy in *Orientalism*, the structure of binary opposition

applies to gender as well. In the process of othering, the West defines and constructs an image of the East that rests on the notion of backwardness and irrationality. This construction of knowledge is biased and creates a binary of the West's superiority (self) and the East's inferiority (other). Orientalism therefore is "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said 3).

In this process of creating the Orient (other), knowledge production plays an important role. Said explains that knowledge does not require a connection with reality anymore. It spreads quietly without any judgment. Said explains that in this silent knowledge production system, "ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously, they are repeated without attribution...what matters is that they are there, to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed uncritically" (116). Knowledge constructed by those in power creates reality for the 'other' where the 'self' resides at the center and has authority over defining the 'other'. In a patriarchal system, men shape (patriarchal) religion and tradition for women creating a binary of self/other in which women are the ones controlled and subjugated by the authoritative male figure. Just as the West positioned the Orient as the opposite of itself, patriarchal ideologies have long constructed a binary opposition between men and women. Men are associated with reason, power, and agency, while women are reduced to roles centered around emotionality, submissiveness, and domesticity. In this framework, women are seen as the 'exotic other'—mysterious, unpredictable, and needing to be controlled or defined by men, much like how the West perceived the East. The position of women in a

patriarchal setup can be explained through “the relationship between the Occident and the Orient [which] is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony...” (5). Through the domination of patriarchal structures, women are created and represented as the ‘other’ based on patriarchal knowledge production.

The psychological aspect of self/other binary also helps in answering de Beauvoir’s concern regarding the othering of women: “How did all this begin? . . . why should man have won from the start? It seems possible that women could have won the victory; ... How is it that this world has always belonged to the men . . .?” (de Beauvoir 20). Because men have consistently used social institutions and power structures to keep their control sustainable, in such consistent modes of patriarchal power, the ‘other’ is conditioned to believe its inferiority. The conditioning of the ‘other’ as inferior makes the ‘other’ rely on the definition provided by the subject while submissively accepting its status as the object that exists in complete opposition to the ‘self’. Ingrid Olson et al. in their article “Understanding Social Hierarchies” (2015) explain that “lower-status individuals have trained themselves – perhaps unconsciously - to perceive subtle dominance cues because they will incur greater costs than higher-status members if they perceive these cues incorrectly” (531). While the dissertation focuses on instances of resistance to patriarchal structures, it will also show the successful implementation of patriarchal forms of control that bound women to an inherent understanding of their otherness.

3.2 Bhabha's Notion of Third Space

In tracing the role of patriarchy in the lives of women, women's resistance to patriarchal structures of control is equally important to consider. The third space here refers to the position women create for themselves in the narrative of patriarchy and gender. Since this dissertation focuses on the experiences of women influenced by patriarchal manipulation of religion and innovation to women's traditional roles, exploring third space highlights active negotiation with those experiences through which women place themselves at a position of advantage or make space for existence in patriarchally charged environments. This dissertation will explore the active engagement of women in creating a space of de-marginalization. This section will talk about different versions of the third space and their relevance to the dissertation.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduced the concept of hybridity and third space in terms of cultural interactions. In the context of colonial structure, hybridity, according to Bhabha, refers to the process through which the identity of the colonized transforms because of its interaction with the colonial power. As a consequence, a new identity emerges from the cultural negotiation of the colonizer and the colonized. In postcolonial debate, hybridity, according to Ankie Hoogvelt – as described in the book *Globalization and the Postcolonial World* (1997) – is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (158). Talking about the formation of new forms of identity Bhabha stresses the need to “think beyond narratives of

originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (19). In these moments, Bhabha explains emerges “‘in between’ spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood ... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (19). Hybridity, therefore, allows the formation of new subject positions that contest and challenge prior forms of fixed structures while also attempting to negotiate with those structures. Seeing hybridity as a challenge to fixed identities, Diana Fuss in her book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (1991), describes it as a response to essentialism, or “the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). Jonathan Rutherford in his chapter “Interview with Homi Bhabha: The Third Space” (1990) links this idea to cultural transformations saying that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” making them prone to change (211).

Connected to the idea of cultural and identity formation is third-space which refers to the in-between spaces where hybrid identity is constructed. According to Fiona Covarr in the article “Hybridity, Third Spaces and Identities in Ursula Le Guin’s *Voices*” (2015), a third space allows “the colonised to create a hybrid identity which incorporates aspects of both the central culture and their own marginal culture” (130). The presence of a third space allows the individuals to negotiate in these spaces by “either accepting or rejecting certain cultural values and differences, the colonised are able to ‘hybridise’ themselves, that is, take on various cultural aspects of their environments” (130-31). Here, the third space presents itself

as a place where negotiations and transformations take place for the hybrid's construction.

While Bhabha talks about hybridity and third space in terms of colonial structures, these ideas can be tested in various other power and control-related dynamics. The construction of hybrid identity as a form of negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized and the space that makes such constructions possible – the third space – can also be seen in terms of the place of women in the patriarchal system.

The construction of a hybrid identity and the development of a third space denotes a form of resistance on the part of the one under authoritarian rule. Bhabha (1994) explains that hybridity and the development of third space is “a problematic of colonial representation... so that other ‘denied’ knowledge enters upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (156). In denying the dominant knowledge structure, the third space in the case of women's resistance would mean unburdening themselves of a patriarchally defined version of ‘other’ (as women). According to Rutherford (1990) hybridity “is the ‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge” (211). For women, such a space would pave the way for dismantling patriarchal knowledge with an attempt to redefine religious and traditional gender roles. Third space here does not mean a position outside the structure of patriarchy and gender creating an identity that would be sheltered from social influences; rather, it refers to a place where active negotiation can take place without forcible assimilation into the patriarchal version of womanhood. Bhabha (1994) states that “the transformational value of [third space] lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One...nor the Other...but something else besides, which contests the terms

and territories of both” (28). Two of the novels in this dissertation address the theme of prostitution as a form of retaliation to the patriarchal structures of control women have been exposed to. Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* present us with Adaku and Firdaus respectively. Both these characters choose to become prostitutes creating a third space where they still engage with men and acknowledge their otherness as women but manage to live life on their terms as prostitutes. While talking to Nnu Ego, Adaku remarks that she intends to educate her daughter and live a fulfilling life and admitting the role of men, she says, ““though I shall not do so without male companionship.’ She laughed again. ‘They do have their uses’” (Emecheta 223). Adaku’s third space allows her to negotiate between patriarchal structures while creating a space for herself.

The emergence of other positions also challenges the notion of opposing binaries. Since identities remain in flux through negotiation with the dominant narrative, the idea of one correct version of knowledge/power structure becomes irrelevant. The concept of third space creates an opportunity for the development of a subject position through constant negotiation with the dominant narrative. Keeping in view women and the narrative of patriarchal control, the new subject position would indicate a space created by women in the form of resistance to the constrictive patriarchal narrative of control and subjugation.

This work will highlight various versions of the third space developed by women through the analysis of literary texts and contemporary debates concerning women. Within the context of this dissertation, the third space represents the discursive, digital, or symbolic

zones that marginalized women inhabit or create in order to assert agency and express their experiences—often outside or against dominant patriarchal and nationalist narratives. Frequently, this third space becomes the ground upon which mini-narratives are constructed and shared. The dissertation shows the presence of third space beginning from women’s silent and subdued negotiations with patriarchal structures towards more clearly defined third spaces depicted through the hijab ban and FGM debates in the current global political climate. Through these spaces, women create an identity that not only challenges constrictive patriarchal notions but also formulates a way of redefining their identity with a sense of ‘self’.

3.2.1 Mini-narratives

A common characteristic of the postcolonial feminist approach is the need to look for small pockets of narratives that portray a marginalized yet equally engaging perspective of the colonial times and its aftermath. These pockets of narratives often appear at the peripheries of major debates and engaging with them can be tricky since they tend to wake the silent parts of history. Once engaged, the presence of these narratives is hard to shake off and the complications associated with them become deeper. For the sake of understanding, these narratives will be termed as ‘mini-narratives’ – denoting the debates at the peripheries that engage with the center by either negotiation or resistance. The term was initially used by Lyotard as “little narratives”. The concept of mini-narratives can also be explained through metanarratives – or dominant narratives that shape discourse. Jean Francois Lyotard in the book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) termed mini-narratives as

“Le petit récit” meaning “the little narrative [that] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention” (60). Through mini-narratives, the exploration of the Other becomes possible by excavating the dominant narratives and looking for the unknown. In explaining the need to develop new ways of knowing, Judy Rivera-van Schagen and Judith Rivera-van Schagen (2002) highlight the importance of mini-narratives “that form new emancipatory ways of knowing and critiquing” (152). Through these ways emerges a form of knowing that is not limited in its perspective and allows the development of multiple narratives; “a form of knowing in which fragmentation and ambiguity are encouraged and accepted as strong discourse; a form of knowing in which differences are recognized and accepted as equal; a form of knowing in which power is not limited to the powerful” (153). Such forms of knowing result in the formation of mini-narratives making the development of new narratives possible.

It is through mini-narratives that one can engage with the dominant narrative by challenging them and highlighting the loopholes in the metanarrative by producing new forms of knowledge. Rivera-van Schagens, while talking about Gloria Anzaldua’s work, explains that mini-narratives develop when the individual residing at political, psychological, or geographical borderlands “develops a consciousness based on the multi-voices that constitute such position” (153). With this unique position, the individual attains a consciousness through which “emerges a discourse (Lyotard 's mini-narrative) that adopts those elements of the culture that are beneficial while it rejects those that will betray” (153). As a result, the individual can produce a narrative of their own in connection to the dominant narrative that conveys the individual’s viewpoint. For other voices to emerge that make

mininarratives “those inhabiting borderlands must accept, adopt, and reject elements of those borderlands as their identity deems necessary” (155). It is through active engagement and the desire to produce a voice of one’s own that mini-narratives function. It is “the voices of those [at the periphery that] ring through from the crevices of the culture as strongly as those more powerful though still subjugated” (156). In the texts selected for analysis in this dissertation, various characters present their mini-narratives in different forms. In some cases, such as Adaku and Firdaus, the mini-narrative is constructed through rebellion and rejection of patriarchal structures of control. In other cases, such as Nnu Ego, the mini-narrative is presented to the reader that shows Nnu Ego’s understanding of patriarchal norms that bind her through institutionalized motherhood. In *What the Body Remembers*, Roop, the protagonist of the novel presents a mini-narrative through which she revives the dead Kusum in the story while puncturing the patriarchal narrative.

To extend the concept of mini-narratives, it is worth returning to Chandra Mohanty again to revisit her caution about universalizing women. The concept of situated knowledges that calls for contextual and historically specific narratives discussed in Chandra Mohanty’s essay “Under Western Eyes” (1984) will help explain the notion of mini-narratives. One of the defining features of mini-narratives is their ability to highlight the “intricacies and the effects of particular power networks” (Mohanty 340). Since mini-narratives work along the dominant narrative but present ideas that are either whispered or appear from peripheral positions, they tend to present alternative voices and viewpoints while engaging with the dominant discourse. Chandra Mohanty’s essay talks about the importance of having multiple narratives to have an informed and nuanced understanding of categories such as third-world

women. Mohanty challenges the idea of presenting “‘Third World Women’ as a singular monolithic subject” suggesting that such a presentation can create a discourse that ignores various other factors involved in shaping the lives of women (333). In the portrayal of this ‘monolithic subject,’ there is a dominant narrative (veil, backward traditions, genital mutilation, harem, etc.) taken up by Western theorists upon which they build their debate with the goal of “improving the lives of women in 'developing' countries” (343). Mohanty is of the view that such an analysis of women places them in a non-progressive and conservative state “construct[ing] ‘third-world women’ as a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victims of particular cultural and socio-economic systems” (338). Keeping Mohanty’s argument in view, the debates regarding third-world women need to be more than their constricting attire (the veil), male dominance (harem), and victimization of the colonial system. This is not to suggest that the debates about third-world women by Western theorists are redundant; rather, it is their detached approach from the lives of the women they depict that makes them futile. These debates ignore socio-economic realities making them incomplete.

Mohanty challenges this one-sided depiction of women and suggests looking at multiple narratives that tend to explain the situation of women and their predicament. Only then, would scholars be in a position to propose ways that might help in “*improving the lives of women*” they so earnestly desire (emphasis mine 343). One such work that Mohanty talks about is that of Maria Mies which “illustrates the strength of Western feminist work on women in the third world” (335). Mies’ work studies the work of lace-makers in a town in India “to carefully analyze a substantial household industry in which ‘housewives’ produce

lace doylies” (345). Since Mies's work is geographically specified and focuses on a unique mode of production, her analysis would be much closer to the experiences of these women and will be able to reflect the dynamics of labor and economics Mies intends to look at. Instead of placing the “mode of patriarchal organization” at the center of her narrative, Mies develops the female figure as the subject of her study as an active participant who is resisting and engaging with the power structures, presenting a narrative of economic and financial independence amidst patriarchal structures.

In the context of this dissertation, mini-narratives become a critical feminist and postcolonial tool – offering space for women’s voices that are typically silenced in official histories or dominant patriarchal structures. These narratives are often embedded in oral testimonies, social media posts, private conversations, fictional accounts, and bodily acts of resistance. They are powerful precisely because they do not seek to speak for everyone, but rather reveal personal truths, localized injustices, and subjective experiences. In texts like *Cracking India* and Manto’s stories, mini-narratives function as a corrective to official Partition narratives, which often erase the suffering of women or subsume their stories under nationalist pride. Through the fragmented, personal perspectives of characters like Lenny or unnamed women in Manto’s fiction, alternative histories emerge – centering trauma, loss, and survival. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus’ life story is itself a mini-narrative told just before her execution. It doesn’t seek to rewrite Egypt’s history but powerfully confronts the system that failed her. Mini-narratives also appear non-verbally. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego’s body carries the traces of exploitation and maternal labor, becoming a narrative space. In cases like FGM, honor killing, and widow immolation, the female body becomes a

site of contested narrative – simultaneously scripted by patriarchy and interrupted by moments of resistance, memory, or mourning. The presence of social media posts, hashtags, and testimonies shows how women today use digital platforms to share mini-narratives that defy censorship or state control. These posts may be brief or anonymous, but they puncture grand narratives of honor, religious piety, or national unity – offering instead a mosaic of fear, dissent, and solidarity.¹

The process of examining the mini-narratives allows us to explore the specific, individual challenges women face under patriarchy, providing a more detailed and personal understanding of their experiences. This will help in tracing different levels of impact on women in circumstances where religion is manipulated, and traditional roles are redefined by the male elite and used to their advantage. This will also help in analyzing different responses on the part of the female subject as they maneuver their way through cycles of marginalization and subjugation that are justified using religion and tradition.

3.2.2 Social Media and Third Space

While the production of mini-narratives serves as one of the ways women create a third space, the presence of women on digital media platforms dealing with contemporary issues concerning religion in the political sphere presents another form of third space. The involvement of religion in the political sphere is not something new and religion has long

¹ It is important to recognize the conceptual overlap between third space and mini-narratives in this study. While the two terms are theoretically distinct – the third space referring to the site or condition of cultural negotiation, and mini-narratives referring to localized, personal forms of storytelling – they often function together. The third space provides the conditions for the emergence of mini-narratives, which in turn populate that space with acts of resistance, redefinition, and agency.

influenced the conversations around global politics. In the case of women, these conversations presented various hurdles such as restriction on hijab leading to a lack of freedom of choice, continuing practices of sati and honour killing in the subcontinent, and the prevalence of FGM in various African nations. The search for a third space developed by women through digital platforms such as online news articles and social media hashtags will expose those narratives that constantly puncture the dominant patriarchal narratives in an act of resistance.

Digital media, in today's world, is a phenomenon concentrated with all sorts of narratives (social, political, religious, etc.) in constant engagement with each other. By engaging with these narratives, individuals bring their lives to the digital network. Aimee Morrison in her chapter "Social, Media, Life Writing" (2019) talks about the way "social media is predicated on the production, dissemination, reception, and response to and of various sorts of texts by and about the self" (41). Through social media participation (engagement on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram), users bring their 'self' onto these platforms and as a result, these platforms become sites of personal life stories. Talking about hashtags, Morrison argues that "each of these multimedia fragments can act as components of life stories, as representatives of a group of similar texts comprising genres, as gambits in private or public conversations, or as aesthetic or cultural objects" (41). Social/Digital platforms, therefore, tend to become sites that connect with one's identity and allow one to interact with a broader audience.

In the scope of this dissertation, digital platforms are seen as sites that enable the development of a third space for women allowing them to present their mininarratives while negotiating with structures of oppression in real time. Ingrid Bachmann, Dustin Harp, and Jaime Loke in their book *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research* (2018) say “media are sites of considerable ideological negotiation and contestation, and gender negotiations are no exception” (2). As sites of gender negotiation, social media, and other online platforms serve as spaces for contesting gender-related oppressive and confining narratives that marginalize women. In challenging these narratives of oppression, women can develop an identity that embraces religious and political nuances in their lives. Dr. Kitsy Dixon in her article “Feminist Online Identity: Analyzing the Presence of Hashtag Feminism” (2014) highlights the importance of hashtags in generating a version of feminism and female collective identity. Dixon comments that “in theory, the concept of hashtag feminism has created a virtual space where victims of inequality can coexist together in a space that acknowledges their pain, narrative, and isolation” (34). Online engagement through “hashtag feminism was defined as a way to be involved without directly being involved” because of societal or patriarchal limitations (35). Dixon acknowledges that “women’s stories are gendered and telling their stories in a male cultured society has silenced their voices” and therefore “the humanist approach of creating alternative meaning systems associated with women sharing their real-life experiences helps them to ... ‘re-author their lives’” (36). Online media platforms offer women the space where stories can be told while engaging with thousands of other stories that resonate with their lives.

Hashtags serve as one of the ways through which online agency and the creation of a third space can be seen. Gina Masullo Chen, Paromita Pain, and Briana Barner in “Hashtag Feminism”: Activism or Slacktivism?” (2018) describe hashtags as a source of voice and agency for the marginalized. The writers contend that starting from Twitter hashtags now rule over social media and “provides a potent tool to give voice to the marginalized and silenced, and thus, contributes to social media’s role in fomenting social justice, political resistance, and empowerment for women” (198). Offering a way to penetrate major narratives “the hashtag offers discursive power to galvanize the voiceless into intimate publics that produce a coherently robust form of activism online, particularly among those left out of the traditional mainstream media discourse” (198). Along with this, hashtags also have the potential to pull people together from various backgrounds uniting them in their efforts towards a unifying goal. Gina Chen et al. (2018) comments that “feminist activists have utilized this energizing aspect of the hashtag as a means of drawing women together online” (200). By offering a way to engage with narratives that affect and influence women’s lives, hashtags enable the formation of a third space and a unique female identity.

The hashtag has great potential for women’s empowerment because it allows women themselves from a variety of feminist perspectives to define their own space online. Hashtag feminism allows particular groups of women to rally around a hashtag and form intimate publics with other women who share their experiences, cultural history, and social locations. Hashtags such as #LatinasAreNot, #NotYourAsianSidekick,

#BlackGirlsMagic, and #WhyAllWomen in particular foster specific instances of agency through allowing women to define and articulate their own feminisms (211).

Hashtagging is one of the ways this agency and development of one's own space is manifested in online spaces. Another useful facet of online platforms in the form of hashtagging is their ability to multiply the ideas and efforts of resistance while documenting the prevalence of forms of oppression. Ryan Bowles Eagle in his article "Loitering, Linger, Hashtagging" (2014) explains that the massive number of similar stories presented by several diverse voices highlight social issues such as gender-based violence. Hashtag therefore in such cases "serves as powerful evidence for the pervasiveness of violence against women—evidence that cannot be easily silenced" (352). Along with this hashtag create "a central collaborative hub where women can share and circulate feminist resources among themselves" (352). Eagle refers to these online platforms as "archives of information" where women can unite in their efforts to form a collective identity while also providing each other with necessary resources (352). Reiterating the same idea, Tanja Carstensen in the chapter "Gender and Social Media: Sexism, Empowerment, or the Irrelevance of Gender" (2014) highlights the potential of social media to "provide spaces for users to empower each other, to establish events and protests and mobilize for political action" (488).

While the 'archives of information' serve as one of the ways through which hashtagging and meme construction play their role in creating a third space for women, other methods include the ability to challenge the dominant narrative. Talking about the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory meme, Christina Foust and Craig Weathers in their chapter

“Memes in Social Movement 2.0” (2021) explain that the meme “helped *articulate* a larger collective identity, ‘critical thinkers questioning authority’” (emphasis original 137).

Challenging the dominant narrative takes place “as individuals play with words and meanings, eventually inviting others to join, and setting into relationship a suite of other performances as expressions of the collective identity” (137). Through the circulation of memes, users were able to excavate historical records prompting a significant change.

Through their ability to challenge dominant narratives, hashtagging and tweeting also play a significant role in highlighting social injustices and encouraging change. Roslyn M. Satchel and Nicole V. Bush in their chapter “Social Movements, Media, And Discourse” (2021) explain that in online protests regarding Black Lives Matter, the discursive structure of tweets and use of hashtags played a crucial role in “counter[ing] the Black criminality stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media” (174). Tweets, in this case, produced a language that “that contemporary Black intersectional audiences would likely understand, and through this use of language they created a shared way of talking about the movement (183). Along with this, “the use of hashtags further generates shared meaning and a way of knowing” through a concise and comprehensible message (175). The authors explain that usage of hashtags allowed users to be brief using “key phrases that represent the movement as a whole and promote familiarity with the issues the movement addressed” (183). Moreover, the tweets used did not carry distracting or redundant information rather they “used metaphors that Black audiences would understand. This shared way of talking about the movement generated knowledge and functioned as a call to action for the audience” (183). While

hashtags and tweets provide different discursive affordances, social media platforms also create a sense of urgency by reporting and responding to events as they happen. Talking about Black Lives Matter online protests, Satchel and Bush comment that “all three Black Lives Matter chapters provided firsthand accounts, in real time, of the movement’s demonstrations and other events it was involved in” generating urgency and prompting a call for action (176).

Although online spaces can empower, they can play their role in subjugating the marginalized while echoing similar forms of oppression. Diana C. Parry et al. in the book *Digital Dilemmas: Transforming Gender Identities and Power Relations in Everyday Life* (2019) explain that “the problems and paradoxes created through the intersection of gender ideology and the possibilities of digital environments create both spaces of positive explorations and embodiments, as well as sites of gender injustice” (2). In a chapter titled “States of Exception: Gender-based Violence in the Global South” (2018), Sujata Moorti also highlights digital media’s dualistic role in undermining feminist activism. Moorti comments that by portraying occurrences of sexual assault as exceptional “news coverage ends up undermining the goals of feminist activism that they seem to uphold. This paradoxical approach by news media is not new but has been amplified by digital media flows and has necessitated new tactics from feminists to combat gender-based violence” (148). On the other hand, while online platforms can multiply positive efforts of resistance, these spaces can also twist the meaning associated with these efforts to minimize their effect. For example, #BlackLivesMatter was immediately contested with #AllLivesMatter which “caused the

original to be emptied of its meaning” (Lagos and Antezana 141). Claudia Lagos and Lorena Antezana in their chapter “Online Framing on Abortion and Violence in South America: Dissonant Sense Making” (2018) talk about this counter meaning making strategy of social media platforms that can be equally damaging.

Talking about #NiUnaMenos which was a Latin American feminist movement against gender-based violence, Lagos and Antezana explain that the hashtag “triggered a quick online response claiming that everybody—not only women—should be protected and have the right to enjoy a life free of violence” (141). As a result, various hashtags emerged such as “#NadieMenos, a genderless hashtag” symbolizing a deviation from the campaign of gender-based violence (141). With the hashtags emerged other (opposing) phrases such as ““Everybody counts,” “Women, girls, boys, pets, should be protected,” “No person is more valuable than another,” “Stop violence of any kind, against any gender,” and “No more violence at all”” (141). Such examples highlight that specific and “focused campaigns” can lead to acts of contestation promoting divisions (140).

While these are some of the challenges in digital spaces, one cannot ignore the empowering potential social media sites and online platforms provide. Parry et al. comment that “technology, and in particular social media, presents an open platform for the development and dissemination of ideas and the challenging of social norms” such as gender inequality (8). Seen as an ‘open platform’, social media sites can magnify protests and movements allowing greater “public attention” (8). In the case of social issues such as gender inequality, the increased public engagement can “help usher in public discourse to make

gender inequity visible in new, collectivized ways” (8). The ability of social media to become sites of resistance paves the way for puncturing the patriarchal narrative that marginalizes women. An example of these narratives of resistance is discussed by Sujata Moorti, who highlights online blogs as platforms for feminist voices, offering alternative perspectives on rape cases. Moorti explains that while the description of rape cases centered on the brutality of the incident and victim shaming, online blogs conveyed a different narrative. Moorti comments that “the most noteworthy aspect of Nirbhaya [rape case], ... was the proliferation of feminist commentary on blog sites, such as *Kafila* and *Moor*”. (154). Since these sites functioned separately from mainstream media, they were able to incorporate “a range of voices, which offered incisive and nuanced critique of media coverage of the case, police inaction, and the state’s indifference to gender-based violence” (154). Carrying an in-depth discussion that explored “the social, political, and institutional factors underpinning gender-based violence”, these sites excavated the Nirbhaya case by looking at various intersecting discourses (154).

These blog sites became a means of creating a third space that enabled other narratives to emerge speaking to causes of violence against women in the form of rape. These blog posts also brought attention to implementing solutions placing the female figure at the center. Instead of looking at Nirbhaya’s rape as an exclusive incident, these posts engaged with various other discourses to produce a nuanced approach towards violence against women. Dustin Harp and Ingrid Bachmann (2018) comment that “while mainstream media was prone to reinforce traditional (patriarchal) rape narratives, feminist voices entered into

the mediated public sphere to provide an alternative narrative” (188). Harp and Bachman further explain that the current form of digital media does not rely “on gatekeepers to choose whose voices are heard” and in doing so “allows for a greater diversity of voices to enter into public discourse ... to challenge dominant ideologies” (188). Functioning as a platform that allows multiple diverse voices, “it is indeed in this new digital media environment that counter-hegemonic ideologies are provided a space from which to present and articulate alternative perspectives and views” (188). Dorothy Lee Goehring in her article “Muslim Women on the Internet: Social Media as Sites of Identity Formation” (2019) analyzes the role of social media in identity formation specifically that of a Muslim woman. Talking about X, formerly known as Twitter, as a site that allows the expression of one’s identity by offering a platform where thoughts can be shared, and a wider audience can be garnered, Goehring argues that “identities, and the frameworks that are used to explore and shape them, matter [since] through the action of creating a relationship with another person, one learns something about one’s very self” (21). In the analysis dealing with the development of space for Muslim women, Goehring talks about a UK-based Muslim cleric, Abu Eesa, whose disturbing tweets on International Women’s Day caught women’s attention. In response, “Rabia Chaudry started the #FireAbuEsa hashtag as a means to bring attention to his rhetoric to Al Maghrib and the larger Western Muslim community” (32). On the other hand, “Hind Makki offered #MuslimMaleAllies as another option of expressing opposition to this instance. . . Makki asked for stories of male Muslims who ‘support the women and girls in their lives’” (32).

This hashtag is notable, however, for being an example of active resistance of an incident that hurt so many. . . this hashtag inspired Twitter users to name and honor Muslim males who did not find aspects of feminism to be incompatible with being Muslim or threatening to their own masculinity— rather, the men celebrated on Twitter were celebrated because of the support and respect for women’s agency that they showed. This hashtag is also a particularly interesting intervention into the situation itself, as it diverts attention away from Abu Eesa and his statements and toward these other examples, minimizing the destructive nature of Abu Eesa’s statements and providing a space for women to utilize their agency in order to reject them without conflating them to be representative of all Muslim men (33).

Based on Goehring’s analysis, X and other social media websites such as Facebook and Instagram can be seen as sites used by women to create a third space for themselves; a space that allows negotiating with the metanarrative concerning identity formations and contesting definitions that do not conform to lived reality.

3.2.3 Hijab Bans – An Offshoot of Patriarchal Control through Religion

In the Indian state of Karnataka, a recent debate over the hijab led to Muslim female students being denied entry into their universities and colleges for wearing the head covering. The hijab ban was triggered by the rising intolerance against Muslim communities in India and this particular event was one of the ways this intolerance was manifested. In a news article in *Al Jazeera*, an independent Arab news organization, by Rushda Fathima Khan (2022), it is explained that “the situation escalated last week when a group of hijab-wearing Muslim girls

camped outside a college in the state's Udupi district after the authorities shut gates on them" (Khan). The hijab ban is feared to "stigmatize and marginalize [Muslim] women and girls" and it also is a violation of the rights of Muslim women (Khan). Talking about the incident, Khan sheds light on "the visuals of Muslim girls removing their hijab outside their schools" which "created a furore, with social media users calling it 'humiliation'". On the other hand, "Sujatha Gidla, author of the book *Ants Among Elephants*, said it reminded of 'the French police terrorising Muslim women in burkinis' in 2016" (Khan). The hijab controversy is an important topic to consider here mainly because of its religious theme and also because it has long captivated the attention of the West and now Hindu majority countries. Focusing on India (as a Hindu majority country) will portray the engagement of women with the meta-narrative (religion and politics) considered here. The hijab ban exemplifies contemporary efforts to regulate women's attire by restricting religious symbols. Such bans reflect a broader form of control over women that parallels patriarchal regulation through religion and traditional values. In both cases, the regulation of women is justified through religious narratives, underscoring a common theme of control. I argue that these forms of control, including those seen in the West through the prohibition of symbols like the hijab, contribute to the continued patriarchal marginalization of women materialized through political discourse. While on the one hand, we see patriarchy's intersection with religious and traditional rhetoric to establish patriarchal control over women, on the other hand, we see Western nations mirroring a similar kind of policing through political control over women's attire.

To understand the importance of the hijab let us first examine the perception of the veil by the Western observer. For the West, the veil had been a source of subjugation that has long oppressed women based on religion and kept them imprisoned. As described by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad et al. in *Muslim Women in America* (2006) “there is no question, however, that as a symbol the veil or scarf or head cover symbolizes to most Americans anything from repression to backwardness” (39). Haddad asserts that in Canada and the United States, feminists “have been articulate in describing the *hijab* as a symbol of subordination and oppression of women” (39). This idea is explored further in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* by Lila Abu-Lughod (2013). Talking about the case of “Afghan women who were said to be rejoicing at their liberation by the Americans”, Abu-Lughod comments that “it is commonly thought that the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban is that they were forced to wear the blue burqa” (39). Polly Toynbee’s comment also resonated with this view when she said that “the burka was the battle flag . . . , a shorthand moral justification” for the Afghan invasion (*Guardian* 2002). Leila Ahmad, an Egyptian Sociologist comments that “veiling to Western eyes – the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol (in colonial discourse) of both the oppression of women . . . and the backwardness of Islam” (152). Veiling has, therefore, long captivated the Western observer and their efforts in liberating the Muslim woman have rarely placed the woman at the center. The Western conception of the veil has placed the Western observer and their agenda (of colonial invasion and developing the notion of Islam’s backwardness) at the center.

Keeping the Western perception of the veil as a form of oppression in view, how does one understand the choice of women who are veiling willingly? Do they not know that they are being oppressed? If yes, what makes them comfortable with the idea of veiling or, in other words, as the Western notion would expect, with the idea of being oppressed? Leila Ahmed in her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) addresses “the discourses on women and gender” beginning from the ancient times to the present tracing “the impact on women of the socioeconomic changes that have occurred over the course of the twentieth century” (1, 6). In the theme of women and gender, Ahmed embeds the discourse around the veil and explains that “the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women—was that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression” and collectively these traditions were the primary reasons for the “backwardness of Islamic societies” (151-152). Ahmed’s explanation of the discourse of the veil also highlights the intersection of religion and politics and their inevitable overlap. While Ahmed highlighted the constant meetings of religion and politics through a colonial lens, this dissertation will see this intersection in the 21st century in a globalized and hybrid world political structure. Ahmed’s analysis rests on the suggestion that the impression of the veil “carried” the Orientalist “cargo” of meanings that complicated the conversations around Muslim women and their religious practices (129). The Westernization of the concept of the veil has been problematic because it has attempted to define veil for the Muslim women without allowing them to have a voice of their own on the subject. The discourse around the veil was one of the ways that the West justified its interference through colonial means. Ahmed comments that “it is a discourse on women and the veil in which another history is

also inscribed, the history of colonial domination and the struggle against it and the class divisions around that struggle—a history affecting all Middle Eastern societies” (130). For the West, the position of women in the Middle East and the sub-continent served as a means of entering into the realm of the Other and controlling it. This partly substantiated colonial invasion and the colonial narrative of civilizing the savages.

The West has seen and interpreted the veil and hijab as a symbol of oppression and lack of freedom. In creating a third space by challenging this Western definition of veiling, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes* (2010) by Katherine Bullock contests the Western notion of the veil and associates veil with liberation and freedom. Bullock converted to Islam during her Ph.D. candidacy and started covering herself as a part of the religion. Observing the reaction of people towards this transition, Bullock changed the topic of her doctoral thesis and centered it on the concept of the veil. This book is a result of the negative Western conception of the veil. Bullock raises a series of questions that deal with the idea of the veil “seen as a symbol of oppression in the West” (3). This umbrella question also encompassed concerns regarding the association of Islam with the negative as well as the notion of freedom: “Why did the West seem to malign Islam? How could I and my friends feel committed to something that we felt was liberating, and yet be in so much conflict with the non-Muslim society around us?” (3).

In answering these questions, Bullock states the reasons behind the Western notion of veil. For the European travelers and the Western observer, the veil had been on the list of oppressions an Eastern woman faces. With time this concept escalated, and the native elites

also internalized their conception of the West: “They (native elites) also became convinced that they were backward, their women degraded, and that they ought to follow Western prescriptions for improvement. Unveiling became a central urgency for elites attempting to ‘catch up’ with the West.” (Bullock 4). According to Bullock, the idea of the veil became problematic for the West because it is something the West cannot comprehend and thus, must dominate. It presents a form of resistance by Muslim women that cannot be penetrated and fuelling angry debates regarding the veil: “The notion that the veil is oppressive is an idea born out of domination, or, at least, the will to dominate.” (Bullock 4). With such debates the actual idea behind the concept of veiling subsided and the Western idea started flourishing. Bullock goes on to contest these Western notions by comparing the veil with the denial of gaze: “What could not be seen, grasped as a spectacle, could not be controlled. Moreover, Europeans felt uneasy about the veiled women: the Europeans knew they were being watched by women who were themselves unseen.” (Bullock 6). While contesting the Western notion of the veil, Bullock presents an argument that places the Western observer in a subservient position. The book gives us the veil that is empowering women, depicting them reversing the binaries rather than being suppressed and victimized by the veil.

Connecting these ideas back to the hijab ban imposed on Muslim students, unlike the Western notion regarding hijab, the controversy in India is driven by religious extremism. While the West interpreted the veil as the source of Muslim women’s oppression, the political intolerance towards religious symbols is the present-day version of controlling Muslim women. I argue that both these practices translate into modern-day patriarchal

control over women that uses religion and politics as an excuse whereas women actively negotiate with these structures of oppression in creating a third space for themselves.

The hijab ban incident attracted the attention of many around the globe through its trending hashtags (#HijabBan #HijabIsOurRight). The third space that was initially not available to Muslim women now presents itself in the form of representation through the internet. Although social media has its way of resisting and coercing its users, it also acts as a platform that can help create a third space since it gives its users opportunities to express individual opinions. The #HijabBan hashtag creates a new space that allows Muslim women in India to highlight their Muslim identity while being a part of a Hindu majority nation. The hashtag “has been utilized by women attempting to examine their religious and gender identities” (Goehring 22-23). The role of hashtag thus becomes important in giving voice to the unsaid and making the unheard loud enough for the global community: “The function of a hashtag, and hashtag activism in general, is mostly to raise awareness and educate the general public about a particular idea or concept that they may not have considered before” (25). This function however is not limited in its scope. It extends to identity formation as well and creates space for identities that might otherwise be constricted in terms of representation. This development of the third space will be the theme of the third chapter of this dissertation.

3.2.4 Widow Immolation – Patriarchal Control and Women’s Traditional Roles

The changing meaning and perception towards hijab (ban) depict the modern-day dynamics of (patriarchal) control over women exploiting their religious identity through the display of religious symbols. The other form of patriarchal control this dissertation addresses is the

patriarchal innovation of traditional roles of a woman, that is, wife and mother. The patriarchal innovation of these roles sets unrealistic standards for women and binds them in a confining familial bond. This form of control results in oppression and constant subordination of the female figure reducing her role to a performance of motherhood and marriage. In most traditions, including Islamic and Hindu, a woman is seen in connection to her husband and children. In the description of Muslim women in periodicals such as “*The Muslim Magazine, The American Journal, al-Jumuah, and Islamic Horizons*”, a Muslim woman should exhibit virtues like “obedience, sacrifice, and being unobtrusive by keeping one’s voice soft and low” (Haddad 34). These virtues also encompass the “woman’s primary responsibility” which “according to the conservative publications, is as a wife and mother. A good Muslim woman is expected to set aside any personal aspirations until her husband’s and children’s needs are met” (Haddad 34).

Similarly, the role of woman in Hindu tradition is seen in connection to her husband, and the act of sati – burning of the wife on her husband’s funeral pyre – is the practical implementation of this connection. Cheyanne Cierpial in the article “Interpreting Sati: The Complex Relationship Between Gender and Power in India” defined sati as a “virtuous woman” and a dominant virtue in cases of sati is the woman’s devotion to her husband (2). In these cases, “the wife is supposed to protect her husband from death through serving him, providing for him, caring for him, performing rituals on his behalf, and being devoted to him” (Cierpial 2). The practice of sati is an example of such a form of control where the definition of a woman as a wife is structured to suit patriarchal purposes. While patriarchy

controlled and subjugated women by defining the role of a wife, the Western perception of sati also placed these women at the periphery, adding another intersection to the ongoing oppression.

Gayatri Spivak, well known for her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) gives an iconic statement when she says that “the abolition of this rite [widow immolation] by the British has been generally understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’” (93). While the colonial elites wanted to be the savior, the focus on part of the Indian natives seems to be on “the nostalgia for lost origins” while assuming that “the women actually wanted to die” (Spivak 93). Spivak here directs our attention toward the use of female figures for developing a colonial discourse by the British and the resistance by the natives to keep patriarchal culture alive. Umme Al-Wazedi (2021) in her chapter “Postcolonial Feminism” explains this silent presence of the female figure where the colonizers and the colonized constructed a narrative around the female figure while she remains an object. In the colonial environment, “the British imperial project helped to reconstruct what pure and native Indian culture looked like. The indigenous elites held the view that women who committed sati were heroines who were holding up the Hindu religion” (157).

The debate regarding widow immolation depicts the converging of tradition (a woman sacrificing herself for her husband) and patriarchy. The traditional role of women, especially in the case of sati, has played a great “role in the patriarchal oppression of women” (Al-Wazedi 158). It is precisely this conflicted and challenged position of the female figure

that this dissertation aims to trace. Spivak (1988) in reference to the lack of representation of the subaltern woman explains that “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears ... into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (102). While we had *white men saving brown women from brown men*, it was not the woman being saved; rather, it served as a prerequisite for establishing an argument for colonization. This dissertation will focus on presenting women as a subject in history while tracing the narratives of tradition, religion, and gender in colonial contexts.

Understanding varying approaches towards sati will help us understand the theme of this dissertation since it is a subject that shows patriarchy’s intersection with tradition. The arguments often presented in connection to sati, on the one hand, aggressively highlight patriarchal Indian values, and, on the other hand, predominantly focus on searching for religious justification. However, the debates surrounding the subject of sati still tend to leave the actual subject (the woman on the burning pyre) silent. In an article titled, “Widow Immolation in Mughal India: Perceptions of French Travellers and Adventurers in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”, (2014) Sakul Kundra shows the perception of French travelers about widow immolation in pre-colonial India.

Kundra examines the narratives of French travelers considering Spivak’s notion regarding saving the female figure. Kundra explains that much before recent scholarship on sati, eighteenth-century travelers attempted to show the harrowing details of widow immolation and the reasons behind the practice. Kundra’s analysis draws on religious,

traditional, and devotional elements depending on the period under examination and the context in which the husband dies. Some of the travelers realized that the practice had deep religious roots since it was associated with Lord Shiva – a prominent figure in Hindu mythology: “Colonel Polier has described the mythic rationale for the practice: the story of the marriage of sati with lord Shiva who immolated herself to save the honour of her husband, her re-incarnation as Parvati and also her eternal love with Shiva” (64). While this depicts a religious and mythological connection, it shows devotion and emotional connection on the part of the female figure which further became a reason for sustaining the practice of sati for widows who willingly burn themselves.

Talking about this willing sacrifice, Kundra explains that in pre-colonial times, when a region was taken over by a Muslim king, the women of the palace would sacrifice themselves to save themselves from the conquering king as the queen of Rani Karnavati did “with 13,000 women” (67). The episodes of immolation depicted that to protect their chastity, Hindu women “were even ready to sacrifice their lives. Their observation reflects that this sacrifice were grave mostly [sic] when the Muslim defeats Hindu raja rather than other way round” (67). Another reason for the practice of sati documented by Kundra in his article was the generational knowledge regarding widow immolation where women tend to teach their daughters the worth of dying with their husbands and the rewards of the afterlife. Kundra explains that the French travelers noticed the profound effect it had on the lives of women since girls who were married earlier in life were not mature enough to question the tradition and the practice went on to sustain “male chauvinism” (68). The strengthening of

this belief resulted in diminished individual choice since “when some widows resisted this crude custom, they were socially boycotted. Thus, it was the public opinion that compelled the widows to accept the irrational principle of honour” (68).

Kundra’s extensive analysis of the travelers’ perception of sati places the account of travelers at the center and in doing so concludes that “they [French travelers] rightly discerned that the patriarchal nature of the Indian society and the material interests of the Hindu priesthood were at work in patronising and enforcing practices that victimised women” (81). However, this conclusion is the result of the *travelers’ perception*. It is the astonished traveler that is highlighted while the woman burns; the criticized custom remains dominant in the debate while the victim remains silent; the debate shows us that the travelers “were curious inquisitive observers of Indian society and authors of detailed, insightful yet opinionated accounts of what they witnessed in India, as well they heard, learnt, assumed and thought about its customs” (80). Sati as a practice remains dominant whereas the victim remains subservient.

4. Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation chooses fiction as its primary medium of analysis because of fiction’s unique capacity to humanize structural violence, convey emotional truths, and foreground lived experiences that are often erased or silenced in historical or sociological accounts. Fiction allows for a nuanced exploration of how patriarchal oppression operates not just on a systemic level, but in the intimate and interior worlds of individuals, especially women, whose voices are frequently marginalized in dominant discourses. Through narrative,

character, and perspective, these texts reveal the complex entanglements of gender, power, tradition, and colonialism in ways that resist reduction or abstraction.

The selected works – *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Woman at Point Zero*, *Cracking India*, *What the Body Remembers*, and Manto’s Partition short stories – collectively span different historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, yet all engage deeply with themes of patriarchy, resistance, and trauma. They were chosen for the way they center female characters navigating oppressive systems, while also exposing how patriarchy adapts across time and space, from colonial Nigeria and Egypt to Partition-era India and Pakistan. These texts offer varied but intersecting lenses – postcolonial, feminist, and socio-political – through which to examine how women experience and resist gendered violence. Including both male and female authors, and both African and South Asian contexts, the selection also enables a comparative approach that traces recurring patterns of marginalization and agency. Fiction, in this sense, becomes both a site of critique and a space for reimagining power, identity, and voice.

In understanding the oppressive influence of patriarchy in the lives of women, this dissertation will look at two forms of patriarchal control: one, through religion and its manipulation, and second, the patriarchal innovation of traditional roles of women. These chapters suggests that through patriarchy’s intersection with religion and tradition, a female victim is created who either submits to the patriarchal power or retaliates against it by creating a space of her own. While these aspects serve as one dimension of the dissertation, a

second dimension will analyze the evolving patriarchal control in today's world and the creation of a third space by women as a response to it.

The first chapter deals with the form of patriarchal control which is implemented through religious manipulation. This chapter will analyze the use of women as objects while focusing on the binary of self/other. The objective of this chapter is to depict the politicization of religion and its manipulative interpretation that marginalizes women and makes them an object in history. This chapter will analyze Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988), Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999), and Sadaat Hasan Manto's short stories: "She is Alive" (2008), "Mozelle" (2012) and "Sharifan" (2008). In all the texts, the chapter will explore the patriarchal exploitation of religion while arguing that women's bodies became sites where the partition of the subcontinent was manifested justifying their victimization in the name of religion.

The second chapter explores the patriarchal innovation of the traditional role of a woman as a mother and a wife by zeroing in on the themes of motherhood, prostitution, and marriage. The chapter argues that the patriarchal definition of women's traditional roles sets unrealistic standards for women to follow binding them in a cycle of oppression and subjugation. This chapter analyzes Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1977), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). With the focus on patriarchal control of the lives of women, the chapter also looks for the development of a third space that allows women to negotiate with the oppressive hold of their traditional roles as wives and mothers.

The third chapter addresses the second dimension of this dissertation that focuses on the intersection of the political and patriarchal with the category of 'woman'. In doing so the chapter talks about current debates in news media and social media dealing with the themes of FGM, widow immolation, honour killing, and hijab bans in today's age. The chapter argues that patriarchal control over women has evolved into newer versions of control that are implemented through the politicization of religion and the implementation of prior practices (such as FGM and widow-immolation) that tend to subjugate and oppress women. However, despite the presence of these forms of control, the chapter argues that women create a third space for themselves while negotiating with the patriarchal and political power structures and digital media platforms has made the development of this third space easier.

The metanarrative of patriarchy has long functioned as a source of oppression for women and throughout history one sees different versions of control over women that served patriarchal purposes. Gerda Lerner, in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), explains

Men and women are biologically different, but that the values and implications based on that difference are the result of culture. Whatever differences are discernible in the present in regard to men-as-a-group and women-as-a-group are the result of the particular history of women, which is essentially different from the history of men.

This is due to the subordination of women to men, which is older than civilization, and to the denial of women's history (23).

The systemic control over women has evolved through patriarchy's reliance on other narratives such as politics, religion, and tradition. Some parts of "the US are legislating to ensure that women can no longer have a legal abortion [and in doing so] lurking patriarchal

beliefs were allowed to reemerge” (*The Conversation* 2022). In this case through the intersection of politics and gender, patriarchy found its way. This dissertation considers patriarchy as a living and evolving power structure that relies on the manipulation of religion and the innovation of traditional gender roles in the domestic sphere to control and oppress women. The dissertation, however, is not a tale of oppression; rather, it searches for moments and episodes of resistance on the part of women. It focuses on the ways women keep up with the evolving presence of patriarchal control and make a third space for themselves where they negotiate with/resist these power structures.

Chapter 1: “I took your pawn, your move”: Women and the Partition of India

The title of the chapter coming from Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* eloquently conveys the dynamics between men during the bloody and chaotic days of partition. The phrase ‘I took your pawn. Your move’, adopts the metaphor of a chess game to highlight the power dynamics and calculated brutality of rape as a tool of dominance. By framing the act as a power struggle between men in a game of honour, the statement depicts the strategic nature of violence where the victim is reduced to a mere pawn – something that is dispensable and minor in the bigger scheme of things. In this metaphor, women’s bodies are not seen as autonomous, but rather they are seen as objects representing patriarchal honour. The statement depicts one man’s reading of his wife’s death in which he concludes that he has been given a profound message through his wife’s body. During partition women’s bodies became sites of violence highlighting the targeted nature of their suffering.

In this chapter, through the literary analysis of *Cracking India*, *What the Body Remembers*, and Manto’s short stories, I explore the effects of patriarchal religion (patriarchal religious honour or patriarchal exploitation of women’s religious identity) on women while also exploring the way women offered alternate understandings of their lived experiences through the creation of mini-narratives. To achieve this end, the chapter examines the presentation of women as victims of patriarchal oppression and the corresponding construction of men as patriarchal figures enforcing oppression upon women, highlighting the way these dynamics contribute to women’s marginalization. Along with this development, mini-narratives will be analyzed as moments that invert the patriarchal

religious narrative. I argue that to understand the effects of the division of the subcontinent one must examine its effects on women's bodies both as they were justified by patriarchally modified definition of religious honour and applied and carried out by the men whose authority was central. I contend that the partition of the subcontinent took place on and through women's bodies and patriarchy used religion as a tool to justify the oppression of women, while women punctured the patriarchal narrative either by presenting an alternate discourse or through their understanding of patriarchal oppression. One key scene from Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* conveys the essence of this chapter. In the scene, Lenny describes the situation at the camp for recovered women. Reaching at the camp, Lenny

. . . chant[s]: 'Ayah! Ayah! Ayah! Ayah!' ... and the children on the roof picking it up shout with all their heart: 'Ayah! Ayah! Ayah! Ayah!' and our chant flows into the pulse of the women below, and the women on the roof, and they beat their breasts and cry: 'Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!' reflecting the history of their cumulative sorrows and the sorrows of their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Rajput great-grandmothers who burnt themselves alive rather than surrender their honour to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses (Sidhwa 229).

The quote conveys the sufferings of women during the bloody days of the partition of India. The chants represent shared sorrow but carry different meanings for both Lenny and the children, and the women. While Lenny and the children cry for Ayah denoting their sense of loss for a specific woman, the chants of women joining the children's cries highlight the trauma of multiple women going through and experiencing similar or worse kinds of

suffering. The chants also unite women of different religions and place them together in their shared trauma. The beating of breasts highlights women's testament to the violence against their bodies. The cries of women create a sense of unity and solidarity as they mourn the pain of women across generations presenting an alternative narrative that highlights unity over prominent discourse of religious divisions during partition.

While the passage highlights the theme of violence and women's expression of grief through the 'beating of their breasts', it also addresses the theme of women's honour. Although the passage presents the act of self-sacrifice as voluntary, it also depicts the notion of patriarchal meaning-making that associates honour with the female body making them sites of violence. The act of burning themselves to protect their honour reflects the patriarchal discourse that patriarchal religious honour resides within the female body. This chapter explores the theme of honour in connection to the female body and examines the way patriarchy exploits religion to further its agenda of controlling and marginalizing women's bodies.

The partition of united India refers to the creation of independent states of India and Pakistan after the dissolution of the British Raj in India in August 1947. Prior to its partition, India had been under strong British influence for nearly two centuries. In the early 1600s East India Company, a trading company, turned towards Asia to get spices. With time, English trade flourished, and the East India Company built multiple factories all over India and gained control over Indian trade. In 1857, the East India Company had the Indian government and education system under its control. The same marked the beginning of direct

British rule in India after the Indian sepoy's rebelled against the British. After this rebellion, the British government took over India and began its century-long colonial venture. The 1947 division of India into two states and the culmination of the British Raj can be seen as a depiction of independence on two levels: firstly, colonial independence and secondly, religious independence.

Central to partition is the narrative and ideology of the Two Nation Theory which establishes the need for a separate homeland for Muslims. This political ideology was proposed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah as leader of the All India Muslim League political party. The party was established in 1901 with an explicit focus on promoting the interests of Muslims in India. It remained the dominant Muslim political party in the subcontinent until the creation of Pakistan. In a pivotal speech in 1940 in Lahore, Jinnah stated that “Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs and literary traditions. They neither intermarry nor eat together, and indeed they belong to two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions” (as cited in Kermani 2017). It is this speech that emphasized the importance of religious differences and the need to establish a Muslim-majority homeland. The dominance of the Two-Nation Theory in the political sphere was the catalyst for the formation of Pakistan and resulted in the division of the subcontinent.

It is important to understand that before the emergence of the Two Nation ideology, Muslims and Hindus had lived in a united India for centuries, despite their vast differences including, but not limited to, language (*The Language of Secular Islam* 2013), communal

arrangement (*Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India* 1975), politics (Mushirul Hasan 1981), and nationalism (Mushir-ul-Haq 1981). However, religious differences between Muslims and Hindus manifested themselves in all manner of political issues. The call for a separate Muslim homeland emerged out of what were blatantly religious conflicts. The ground for seeking a separate homeland was based on the presumption that for Muslims to live by the laws of their religion, a separate state was necessary. The role of religious identity was of great importance here since the united India was home to several religions, cultures, and traditions. The formation of the Muslim League was an expression of the rise in the importance of religious identity. The political struggle for partition emerges with Jinnah becoming a strong advocate for a separate Muslim state, in this way bridging political and religious authority and desire.

Emerging in this political environment was also a religious struggle that intersected with the politics of gender. When the territorial boundaries of India were redefined by political decision-making based on religion, women experienced an unprecedented struggle that was enacted on and through their bodies. While the map of the subcontinent was divided and its borders were redrawn, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh women experienced these divisions in myriad new ways: as victims of rape; shifts in their objectification; and the invention and application of new laws that focused on religious honour, women's sexuality and marriage. In an examination of the literature on women and the partition, this chapter argues that the female body became symbolic of the partition's religious struggle where religion became the source of authority for the fulfillment of patriarchal desire. That is, religion was patriarchally

manipulated and exploited to subjugate women by placing the burden of upholding religious honour on them and associating it with their bodies. I will turn to a review of some key texts which inform my position and which will be applied to an analysis of several novels in later chapters.

Women, Religion, and the Partition of India

In South Asian history, the partition of British India was one of the most violent upheavals resulting in the birth of two separate nations: India and Pakistan. During the 1947 Partition of British India, a massive migration took place, with millions of Muslims moving to the newly created Pakistan (then comprising both West and East Pakistan), while many Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India. However, a significant Muslim population remained in India. While the political and territorial narratives have justified the need for partition, the human cost highlights the tragedy of the event. Millions of people were displaced from their homes leading to forced migrations. As the migrations began, they “took on an urgent and treacherous character: convoys were ambushed, families separated, children orphaned, women kidnapped – and whole trainloads massacred” (Menon and Bhasin 35). In this chaos, religious intolerance and violence grew rampant and people soon became walking symbols of their religions. In the case of women, these struggles multiplied because of their gender. For women, the partition of India brought violence to their bodies causing brutal gendered violence, including abductions, rapes, forced marriages, and mass killings. The violence against women’s bodies took various forms including “stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans;

amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses” (Menon and Bhasin 43). The bodies of women and their religious identity were fused into one and targeting the body meant leaving a mark on the religion of the ‘other’. Violence against women’s bodies “engraved the division of India into India and Pakistan on the women of both religious communities in a way that they became the respective countries, indelibly imprinted by the Other” (Menon and Bhasin 43).

Because of the association of religion with the female body, women were exposed to violence in their own homes as well and killed in the name of honour. During the Partition, the concept of honour became closely tied to the female body, which was targeted by men of other religions as a means of defilement. By violating women, they believed they could celebrate the destruction of an entire religion. Butalia (2014) comments that “the men decided to kill the women and children, fearing that they would be abducted, raped, converted, impregnated, polluted by men of the other religion. . . They called these killings the ‘martyrdom of women’” (6). To breach the honour of the ‘other’ and to humiliate them, their women were targeted. The female body served as a way of inflicting pain on practitioners of other religious traditions by destroying their progeny either by killing their women or mutilating their bodies or by defiling the cultural line by impregnating women. This targeting of the female body highlights the psyche of the perpetrators who sought to target the religion and the entire progeny by attacking women of that faith. It was a common understanding during partition that “a religion whose female adherents are no longer fit to be wife and mother is forever destroyed. They remain a permanently inauspicious figure almost

as undesirable as a barren woman” (Saxena 1258). This war against other religions happened *on and through* the female body. The pregnancies from rape made the events of 1947 a horrifying experience for women which did not end with the division of territories.

On the other hand, fathers, brothers, and husbands killed their women to protect the honour of their religion. Violence against women became inevitable and women became objects as both sides made efforts to kill them first: the ‘other’ and their own. This killing of women reinforced patriarchal norms in which women’s honour and chastity were linked with their bodies. Women’s bodies became extensions of manhood and protecting manhood became equivalent to removing the threat (the female body) that would bring dishonour. As religious significance grew during this time, so too did societal focus on the female body, linking it symbolically to notions of purity, honour, and community identity.

Chandni Saxena (2014) in her article “On Religion and its Implications on Women During Partition of India” focuses on the predicament of “innocent people” during partition and argues that religion was a strong factor in making the partition as bloody as it was (1253). Specifying the crucial role of religion in Indian society, Saxena explains that religion “has ruled the very psyche of Indians since time immemorial” influencing “their day-to-day decisions and *mindsets*” (emphasis mine 1253). While Saxena specifies religion as a dominant factor in making partition violent, I argue that it is the intersection of patriarchy with religion that adds to the violence of the political event. Saxena explains that “religion became the cornerstone of this partition and the reason of all the anarchy and bloodshed. It left a trail of dying men, women and children who were never the active players in the

political decisions of the country” (1253). While the impact of partition was felt and experienced by all, women were doubly marginalized because of partition and the added patriarchal connotations.

The partition of the subcontinent is a classic case study for examining the impact of patriarchal religious discourse on women; and the development of mini-narratives by women as an alternative to the dominant patriarchal discourse. Saxena talks about this junction of women and religion by bringing attention to the repercussions of partition. Although Saxena acknowledges that partition was devastating for men, she highlights that women were doubly challenged during partition since “partition brought different meanings for men and women” (1254). While it was “very tough for men”, for women it was “barbaric” (1254). The gender differences were manifested in the different levels of suffering for men and women. While “it was one time death and thus, freedom from suffering for men ... it was a living continuous hell for women [and] these gender differences were hugely influenced by religion” (1254). The need to distinguish between the suffering of men and women during partition is an important aspect to consider since it unveils the politics of gender at play and also depicts the position of advantage men possess in exploiting and modifying religion resulting in the marginalization of women. The added burden of protecting the sanctity of religion fell on women’s shoulders along with having to move from one place to another while also saving themselves from mass killings. Saxena explains that “women occupy a special place and space in enactments of violence. These women, during partition of India, became bearers of their religion, its honour and sanctity and the social custom within the boundaries of their respective communities” (1256-57). Since women were seen as symbolic carriers of their

respective religious identities, the violence against them was both religious and ethnic in nature – acts “which not only violated their religious community but also sought to 'cleanse' a particular area from the residuals of the warring community” (1256-57). Through the lens of religious honour, this chapter will examine the victimization of women based on the patriarchal definition of religious honour and the subversion of the patriarchal narrative by the female figure. The chapter argues that women’s bodies became sites of religious struggle during partition because of the patriarchal association of religious norms such as honour, purity, and chastity with the female body which resulted in violence against women. While women’s oppression appears to be the dominant discourse during partition, I argue that women actively created mini-narratives that countered the patriarchal narrative of oppression. These mini-narratives exposed the absurdity of associating honour with the female body by giving voice to the silent figures of society as suggested by the image at the beginning of the chapter.

In the next section, I will turn to examine how these themes are explored in a few novels and short stories that focus on the partition. Keeping Veena Das’ (2007) statement in view that “to be vulnerable is not the same as to be a victim” this chapter presents the creation of the female victim by the male patriarchal figure (63). Through the analysis, this chapter brings forth three consistently occurring characters in the texts: first, the female victim; second, the male (patriarchal) figure; and third, the female figure presenting the mini-narrative. The analysis will show that the female victim is *created* by the patriarchal figure who exploits moments of transitions and chaos to possess, marginalize, rape, and/or kill the female figure. The third character that presents the mini-narrative can be either the victim

herself or a different character that tells the tale of victimization as an observer creating a counter-discourse.

***Cracking India* (1999) and the Politics of Religion**

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* is a classic text that focuses on the experience of women and the patriarchal exploitation of women's religious identity to marginalize them. In the novel one becomes aware of the classification of people based on religion where women suffer the consequences of religious identity through their bodies. This section argues that during the time of partition, men used religion to hide the direction of patriarchal control and violence to possess and mutilate/rape the female body. This argument is explored in connection to Lenny's nanny – Ayah. Ayah, being an inaccessible beauty during pre-partition days, is abducted by Ice-Candy man who exploits Ayah's religious identity to hide his actual desire to take control over her body using the backdrop of partition. This section shows that Ayah's victimization results precisely from Ice-Candy man's desire to possess her. To achieve his goal, Ice-Candy man exploits Ayah's religious identity to gain control over the female body. Along with this, this section presents Lenny's narration as a mini-narrative that portrays Ayah as a woman with agency and in charge of her body during pre-partition days proving the thesis that Ayah loses all once Ice-Candy man's patriarchal desires take over.

Cracking India opens with the voice of Lenny, who turned eight in 1947 and is living in Lahore. Lenny's position in the novel is crucial in understanding gender dynamics before and during the partition's religious and political chaos. I contend that through Lenny, the novel presents a mini-narrative that highlights patriarchy's attempt at hiding violence against

women as well as the direction of patriarchal control using the façade of religion. This is because Lenny as a narrator presents a raw version of the events unfolding in front of her – a version that does not depend on associating religion with people, especially during pre-partition days. She becomes aware of a shift in her surroundings as people increasingly begin to identify with their religious affiliations, as described in the novel. Along with this, Lenny's triply marginalized status – belonging to a Parsi community, being disabled, and being a girl – allows her to see and experience events from the fringes without being directly involved. Due to her disability, Lenny spent less time at school and more with Ayah. Her evenings involved regular visits to the park where she would meet people from all walks of life, especially Ayah's admirers. Najia A. Zaidi in her article "Woman Subjection as Reflected in Sidhwa's *Cracking India*" (2020) talks about women's manipulation and marginalization during partition. Highlighting the role of Lenny as a narrator Zaidi comments that Lenny's marginalized status as a girl and her dependency resulting from her lameness "make[s] her dependent on others. In fact, in this case her lameness serves as an eye-opener. Finally, as a girl child she observes all events with strict neutral position which adds authenticity to the historical tale of Sidhwa" (81). Because of her marginal status, Lenny's narrative becomes intimate making her an ideal source of information on political matters and, being closest to Ayah, her observation gives crucial information regarding the unfolding religious dynamics. Through her narrative, Lenny helps the reader in achieving a standpoint that portrays the intersection of patriarchy and religion and its effect on the lives of women. In "*Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*" (1991), Sandra Harding argues that marginalized groups have a distinct advantage in understanding social reality: "Starting off research from the lives of

marginalized people generates less partial and distorted accounts not only of those lives but of dominant institutions as well” (119). This highlights the idea that Lenny's marginalized position, as a child and a Parsi, allows her to reveal truths about Partition that may be obscured from dominant perspectives allowing the reader/critic to achieve a standpoint. Dorothy Smith (1987), another key figure in standpoint theory, explains that marginalized perspectives offer “insider knowledge” into societal structures that those in positions of power may overlook. The standpoint of the marginalized reveals “the practices of power” that are taken for granted by those benefiting from those practices (4). Lenny’s narrative, from her vantage point as a young Parsee girl, assists the reader in understanding how patriarchal power operates through religious identity and becomes a source of gender violence during Partition². D. Jaichithra in the article “Partition Violence in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*” (2016) explores Sidhwa’s text as a Bildungsroman. Talking about Lenny’s narrative, Jaichithra explains that despite Lenny’s claim that her “world is compressed” she takes “full advantage of this limited view ... Bapsi Sidhwa relates through the eyes of her child narrator the partition story from a domestic standpoint, and more significantly, from a

² It is important to recognize that Lenny’s standpoint, as a fictional character, is ultimately constructed through Bapsi Sidhwa’s authorial lens. In this sense, Lenny does not speak autonomously but serves as a narrative vehicle through which Sidhwa articulates the trauma of Partition and the gendered violence it unleashed. While this raises the question of whether Sidhwa is “speaking on behalf of” the marginalized – especially women who experienced sexual violence or dislocation – it also underscores a central strategy in postcolonial feminist fiction: the use of narrative to bear witness. Rather than erasing subaltern voices, Sidhwa’s fictionalization can be read as an act of imaginative recovery, constructing a space where silenced experiences are rendered visible. This tension between mediation and representation is not a flaw but a reflection of the broader difficulty of representing the marginalized in any form, especially when those subjects have been denied the means to narrate their own histories. In acknowledging this complexity, the dissertation approaches such representations as partial, ethically fraught, yet necessary interventions where fiction becomes a third space through which suppressed narratives can surface.

feminist view” (63). Giving an intimate account of partition, Lenny explores and excavates those narratives that might otherwise stay silent.

Closely linked with Lenny is her Hindu nanny whom Lenny calls Ayah – a common term for a nurse or caregiver. The novel’s focus on religion appears at the very beginning when four-year-old Lenny observes “holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretenses to ogle her [Ayah] with lust. Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes, pushing my pram with the unconcern of the Hindu goddess she worships” (Sidhwa 16). Through Lenny’s narration, the reader is informed about the non-existent role of religion during pre-partition days. Ayah’s religious identity, therefore, was not a matter of concern for the Muslim or Sikh spectators ogling Ayah.

As a young innocent observer, Lenny is able to present a tale of partition that is devoid of religious prejudices, and in doing so she exposes the absurdity of seeing people as symbols of their religion. Through such a representation of partition, Lenny’s narrative becomes a mini-narrative. Kamran Rastegar (2006) while talking about Lenny’s narration explains that “the naïve perspective allows Lenny to ask questions that would otherwise be unacceptable and to interrogate the foundations of the communitarian violence around her in ways clearly unavailable to her older family members” (27). In Lenny’s narrative, the understanding that violence is “largely gendered and that the experience of violence is differentiated along gender lines” remains dominant (27). Moreover, it is Lenny’s perspective that allows the reader as well as Lenny to understand that “the differentiation of religious identity [is] largely performative, an artifice” (27). While Rastegar helpfully

interprets Lenny's narration as nuanced, Nilufer Bharucha in the article "Inhibiting Enclosures and Creating Spaces" (2001) presents a different view. Bharucha comments that "Lenny experiences enclosures within enclosures as her space shrinks. Her lameness is allied to her femaleness to deprive her of proper education" (96). As opposed to Bharucha's opinion, I argue that conventional forms of closure in Lenny's life ultimately allow her to present an intimate version of her life along with that of Ayah. Lenny's approach in being an insider (due to her proximity to the events), as well as an outsider (by not being directly implicated in the Hindu-Muslim conflict since she is a Parsi – a community not central to the communal violence but still affected by and witness to it as part of the shared social and spatial fabric), helps my analysis in presenting Ayah as a free woman-turned-victim mainly because of Ice-Candy man's patriarchal desire of possessing her. Lenny's understanding of the violence as being gendered explains the idea of women's marginalization during partition and the exploitation of religion by men for personal gains. Lenny's understanding of religious identities as an 'artifice' depicts the polarization of identities that marginalized women and others who did not fit these clearly defined boundaries.

For Lenny, Nehru, Jinnah, Gandhi, and Mountbatten are mere names but Ice-Candy man, Masseur, Imam Din, and Yousaf are actual people with whom she eats, laughs, and enjoys her evening strolls. As a member of the Parsi community, Lenny and her family are safe from the effects of dividing India. Set in a pre-partition time, *Cracking India* begins with the representation of a united and multireligious India. Riffat Chaudhry in her memoir *Shadows of My Memories* (2014) describes how religious identities were not starkly defined

in United India and how being in harmony with practitioners of other religions was the norm. Referring to her experience Choudhry explains that “Muslim, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians were all friends in those pre-partition days of the British Raj. These different groups had been friends and neighbors for centuries, [and] no seeds of hatred had been planted” (12). Remembering the pre-partition days Choudhry shares that people of different religious identities visited each other’s home “without any fear and sometimes alone, always welcomed by one and all” (12). Moreover, there was an element of mutual respect and “the festivals native to each of the religions were also respected. Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians said ‘Eid Mubarak’ to [Muslims while Muslims wished] them ‘Merry Christmas’ and ‘Happy Holi’ on all of their important holidays and festivals” (12).

Reflecting similar amicable relations between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* begins with a representation of an India that is united and harmonious. As a Hindu, Ayah’s residence with a Parsi family was nothing out of the ordinary. Lenny’s world revolved around Ayah and her potential suitors – Ice-Candy man, Masseur, Yousaf, and Sher Singh. Ayah interacted with these men and was not unfamiliar with their ways. While both Masseur and Ice-Candy man were Muslims, their flirtatious interactions with Ayah were harmless. Masseur was her haven with his “skillful fingers [working] beneath Ayah’s sari”, whereas Ice-Candy man’s “ingenious toes dart[ing] beneath Ayah’s sari” always met resistance (45, 34). Sharbat Khan, another Muslim vendor in the area, was also an admirer of Ayah. However here the difference was that Ayah secretly admired him too: “Ayah shuffles her bare feet and fidgets with her sari. Her eyes are shy, full of messages” while interacting

with Sharbat Khan (72). Sher Singh being a silent admirer maintains his distance, and unlike Ice-Candy man, Singh only delights in being “singled out by Ayah” during conversations (82).

During this brief time before partition, Ayah appears to be strongly in charge of her body. Her agency is depicted on two levels: through her influence over Lenny and her interactions with her group of admirers. Analyzing Lenny’s assertiveness and independence in the novel, Showkat Hussain Dar (2013) comments that “the formative influence of Lenny is no other than a female character Ayah. It is Ayah who epitomizes the strength of the femininity for she infuses in Lenny the ideas of freedom and will” (5). As a consequence, Lenny mirrors Ayah’s agency through her interaction with her cousin whose sexual advances are always rejected by Lenny. This rejection also highlights Lenny’s learned behaviour when she sees Ayah constantly rejecting Ice-Candy man’s unwanted attention. Jacquelynn M. Kleist in the article “More than Victims: Version of Feminine Power in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*” (2011) reiterates the idea with the observation that “through her observations of Ayah’s interactions with her suitors, Lenny specifies that she learns not only about the nature of individuals and the way to get what she wants from them but also about the particular dynamics of their gendered interactions” (71). While Ayah’s agency is depicted through Lenny’s character, Lenny also shows the reader Ayah’s agency by focusing on Ayah’s awareness of the advances around her and understanding of when to rebuke them. The novel, through Lenny, therefore, presents Ayah as a person with agency and individual choice. Kleist explains that “Ayah’s unique influence renders her able to bring together men

of disparate occupations, ethnicities, and religious affiliations ... Even as religious and ethnic violence divides Lahore, Ayah's presence is unifying, calming, and safe" (73-74). Lenny describes this agency at the narrative level when she recalls Ayah telling the group that she would not visit the park if they keep talking about "this Hindu-Muslim business" (85). To this Ice-Candy man immediately responds by saying "It's just a discussion among friends, ... but for your sake, we won't bring it up again" (85). Lenny here highlights Ayah's authority and her ability to control and change the group's dynamics as she pleases.

However, up until this point, the dynamics of romance and admiration focus on who she is as a woman; Ayah being the chocolate brown beauty surrounded by religiously diverse men is presented as ordinary. Despite the approaching political turmoil "the group around Ayah remains unchanged. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee are, as always, unified around her" (88). While this group is aware of the political turmoil and their religious differences, the absence of chaos keeps them connected. Among various Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Parsee jokes, they consider each other's boundaries, and above all, they respect Ayah's presence. Her opinion matters and her disagreement is readily incorporated in the group dynamics all the while the men continue being her admirers.

With the change in political atmosphere, the novel begins to shift such that individuals who initially mingled casually, experience division based on their religious identities. We see this at the narrative level through Lenny's observation when Sher Singh becomes "the slender Sikh zoo attendant" (18). Lenny's household servants "Hari and Moti-the-sweeper and his wife Muccho, and their untouchable daughter Papoo, become ever more

untouchable as they are entrenched deeper in their low Hindu cast” (86). Religious realization is further enhanced when Lenny learns that her neighbors “the Rogers of Birdwood Barracks, Queen Victoria and King George are English Christians” (86). In this way, the novel sets the stage for exposing religious identities and creating religious hierarchies leading or even forcing individuals to choose sides: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Sikh. Becoming “aware of religious differences”, Lenny starts to see people as Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Parsi: “It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves – and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah – she is also a token. A Hindu” (86). It is at this point that religious identity becomes dominant, and Lenny becomes the lens that allows us to explore the association of religion with the female body that serves patriarchal purposes. Jill Didur in the book *Unsettling Partition* (2006) emphasizes the importance of focusing on the literary elements of women's narratives that challenge and disrupt singular interpretations of the historical period of partition. Talking about *Cracking India*, Didur comments that “before partition, Lenny observes how Ayah/ Shanta is able to deflect patriarchal expectations of monogamy and conjugality, [whereas] after partition, her actions are constrained and her agency and body [is] governed by patriarchal struggles” (68). The dominance of religious identities paves the way for patriarchal manipulations that eventually marginalize and exploit Ayah. It is through Lenny’s observation of Ayah, that we come to understand the religious struggle’s effects on the female body for while Ayah is a Hindu at the beginning of the novel, by the end she has become a Muslim after being abducted by Ice-Candy Man and this transition from one religion to another depicts the role of patriarchy in using Ayah as a pawn.

Reiterating this idea, Zia Ahmed (2009) comments that “pre-partition-Shanta is the object of attraction for many Muslim and non-Muslim men, especially Masseur. But post-partition-Shanta is only a ravaged and molested woman who has nothing to fall back upon other than selling her body as a dancing woman” (94).

Arguably, women tend to experience a greater negative impact from geopolitical change than men, and a similar trajectory was seen during the partition. In the case of partition, some matters concerned everyone involved such as the division of the subcontinent, becoming a refugee, separation from family, etc. and some matters concerned women only, such as politicizing the loss of honour, the weaponization of rape and body mutilation and family dispossession. Most of this violence against women had its roots in the exploitation and politicization of religions to suit patriarchal purposes.

Despite their differences, various patriarchal views of religions including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Christianity are *presumed* to associate honour with the female body – a narrative that was dominant during the events of 1947. I say presumed because religious concepts are open to interpretation (or better said, some interpretations have greater authority) and a common trait that emerges across the political application of such interpretations is the subjugation of women. In exploring the religious constraints on women, Bridget Walker (1999) explains that “the churches have often interpreted human nature in a manner that is profoundly damaging to women . . . Christianity may be used to deprive women of autonomy over their own bodies” (17). In a similar vein, the interpretation of religious Hindu texts regarding the role of women also appears to be confining: “Her father

guards her in her childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard her in her old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently” (Olivelle 190). The interpretation of Islamic laws also depicts constraint by implementing laws that concern women’s bodies which in some countries and regions can include genital mutilation. This practice is often seen in connection to Muslim women whereas there is no evidence of genital mutilation in Islamic religious laws.

Cracking India’s Ayah was one such character who *apparently* suffered because of her religious identity during the riots of 1947. While all the other characters were equally at risk of being targeted because of their religions, Ayah suffered the most because she was a woman. Ayah had been a victim of religious politicization by the men she was closely connected with – her potential suitors. Since Lahore was expected to be a part of the new nation – Pakistan – as soon as it became clear that India was to be divided, Lenny observed her neighborhood being depleted of Hindus and Sikhs. During this chaotic situation, an angry mob appears at Lenny’s residence in search of the Hindu nanny. Tricked by Ice-Candy man’s popsicles, Lenny gives away Ayah’s location.

The last thing I noticed was Ayah, her mouth slack and piteously gaping, her dishevelled hair flying into her kidnappers’ faces, staring at us as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes . . . They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet – that want to move backwards – are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth. Her

violet sari slips off her shoulder, and her breasts strain at her sariblouse stretching the cloth so that the white stitching at the seams shows. A sleeve tears under her arm (160).

This moment marks the beginning of Ayah's victimization, where men, during Partition, take advantage of her religious identity, justifying her abduction on their own terms. While Ayah struggles physically against the mob, Lenny's internal struggle is that of guilt and betrayal. The reference to Ayah's facial features and her clothes is particularly important since it exposes how the body expresses the trauma that is being inflicted on Ayah. The men who pretended to be Ayah's admirers were now "drag[ging] her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces" (160). The grinning Ice-Candy man who used to beg forgiveness and was forgiven during casual scuffles with Ayah in the park, turns into a religiously charged fanatic, or perhaps, uses religion to capture Ayah with the aim of possessing her. The dominant role of Ice-Candy man in Ayah's abduction exposes the façade of religion used by men like Ice-Candy man. Ayah becomes a victim because of her gender rather than her religion. Her identity as a Hindu woman becomes problematic in the changing political atmosphere making her doubly marginalized as it paves the way for patriarchal exploitation that masks Ice-Candy man's true intentions. Hina Nandrajog in her chapter "Refugees of the Partition of India" (2018) focuses on the trauma of people forcibly detached from their roots. Talking about Ice-Candy man, Nandrajog comments that "the protagonist [Ice-Candy Man] in

Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man* [another title for *Cracking India*] becomes a monster once he hears tales of atrocities committed on the other side" (119). While Nandrajog sees Ice-Candy man's action of abducting Ayah as driven by religious hatred, I contend that partition being a time of chaos and transition served as a means of masking the direction of patriarchal control. Therefore, for Ice-Candy man, partition was merely a favorable condition that was exploited to his advantage and allowed him to possess Ayah.

The social and religious context of the sub-continent in united India placed great importance on the sanctity and purity of the female body. A woman's body was considered pure as long as it remained untouched. This was one of the reasons that Ayah's brutal removal from the Sethi household was terrifying. Ayah's "wide-open and terrified eyes" reflect her fear that the sacredness of her body was going to be violated (160). It is not so much the act of being dragged away from the people she knew but the fear associated with encountering unknown men that causes Ayah's suffering. Kanchan Mathur's (2008) explanation highlights the mentality and approach towards the female body that resonated closely with the ideology of pre-partition India regarding women. Mathur explains that "a woman is identified primarily with her body functions, seen essentially as a vehicle for male sexual satisfaction and reproduction and its natural corollary, childbearing, rearing and nurturing" (55). The resulting identity of a woman defines "her entire life, her roles, her position and her status in society ... this primary bodily function" (55). Keeping the sacredness of her body intact is Ayah's ultimate priority and she fears that loss as she is

being taken away. The ripping of Ayah's clothes foreshadows the struggles of her body in the form of rape.

The character of Ice-Candy man becomes the embodiment of patriarchy and its exploitation of religion during a time of transition and chaos to marginalize and possess the female figure – Ayah. The abduction of Ayah allows Lenny to see the gendered nature of violence during partition. Jaichithra (2016) helpfully points out that Lenny understands that “remote and calculating men create the climate for violence, and ordinary men carry out the acts. Women, she learns, are often the victims, as in the case with Ayah” (64). Lenny's understanding helps the reader in tracing Ice-Candy man's base desire to possess Ayah. Using partition, Ice-Candy man aims to take control over Ayah – the woman – while he remains unbothered with her religious identity. Ambreen Hai in her article "Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*" (2000) talks about Sidhwa's text in connection to identity, border crossing, and postcolonial feminism. Commenting on Ice-Candy man, Hai asserts that he “becomes the sole representative figure of female violation in this text” (390). Ayah here serves as a “beautiful, desired” body used for male gratification and partition provided Ice-Candy man with a perfect opportunity to possess Ayah (390). While Ice-Candy man represents patriarchal control, Ayah represents the victimized female body. Talking about women's double marginalization through colonization and patriarchy, Zia Ahmed (2009) comments that “Shanta [Ayah] is not one woman but a representative of thousands of Hindu, Muslim and other minority women who were raped, killed, and cut to pieces because of the aftermaths of

British imperialism” (94). While the chaos originated from partition, the exploitation of religion to abduct, possess and rape women was a patriarchal move that resulted in violence against women.

Ayah’s abduction lays bare the desires of Ice-Candy man as a performer of patriarchy rather than a move to remove a Hindu from a Muslim neighborhood. Madhuparna Mitra in his article “Contextualizing Ayah’s Abduction: Patterns of Violence against Women in Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*” (2008) asserts that politically Ayah abduction is “an ideologically freighted event with communal implications (a minority Hindu kidnapped by a Muslim mob), it is also at another level a more routine opportunistic sex-crime” depicting Ice-Candy man’s patriarchal desires (28). Ayah’s abduction presents a narrative that “leaves open the possibility that he [Ice-Candy man] is motivated as much, if not more, by his need to possess the woman who has rejected his advances as he is by a desire to take ‘revenge’ on Hindus” (28-29). During their meeting in the park before partition, Ice-Candy man’s advances at Ayah from under her sari were always discouraged. Most of the time Ayah responds by “angrily smacking his legs and smoothing her sari” leading to Ice-Candy man’s “grovelling and wriggling in the grass to touch the hem of Ayah’s sari” seeking forgiveness (34). Ice-Candy man’s constant advances depicted his interest in Ayah and her abduction presented the opportunity to sexually control Ayah’s body. Mitra comments that Ice-Candy man’s “sexual control over her [Ayah] is more a story of a man’s desire to subjugate a woman than one of religious-communal identity politics (Mitra 30). For Ice-Candy man, partition is an opportunity, and Ayah’s Hindu Identity during a time of transition and chaos creates an ideal

situation for possessing Ayah. Examining Ayah's abduction as an apparent episode of ethnic violence, Kavita Daiya in the book *Violent Belongings* (2008) comments that "for Ice-Candy Man, who desired Ayah but had been rejected by her for Masseur, identifying Ayah as "Hindu" facilitates her objectification and violation in order to fulfill his desire for her ... her body becomes a site of sexual and cultural transaction" (73).

The trauma inflicted on Ayah's body is not limited to her removal from Lenny's house. A few months after Ayah's abduction, Lenny's cousin reveals that "Ayah is just a dancer in Hira Mandi . . . The red light district" (204). Further investigation reveals that Ice-Candy man is her pimp which explains his interest in Ayah's religious identity and in removing her from a Muslim neighborhood. Changing her name from Shanta to Mumtaz, Ice-Candy man makes a miserable attempt at mitigating the damage he had done by abducting Ayah. The exploitation of religious identity during partition here becomes a tool that Ice-Candy man utilizes for his personal gain using partition as the backdrop. While Ayah suffers because of Ice-Candy man's patriarchal intrusion in her life, Ice-Candy man rejoices at gaining control over her body. Along with her religion, Ayah also loses her name, and this breaks the final connection with the life she had previously known putting her into an unfamiliar realm. Lenny's visit to Ayah at the very end of the novel shows her dressed up like a bride but without a voice of her own.

She looks achingly lovely: as when she gazed at Masseur and inwardly glowed. But the illusion is dispelled the moment she opens her eyes – not timorously like a bride,

but frenziedly and starkly – and says: “I want to go to my family.” Her voice is harsh, gruff: as if someone has mutilated her vocal cords (220).

Ayah’s body has become a site of conflict where her Hindu identity keeps gasping for air while the patriarchally imposed Muslim identity keeps on occupying more space leaving her empty and devoid of feeling either. It is interesting to note the change that Ayah goes through as a person. Ayah, who would resist Ice-Candy man’s slightest attempts at her sari, is now working as a prostitute in the most notorious area of Lahore devoid of her authority and voice. Talking about the scene of the abduction, Kavita Daiya comments that Sidhwa “does not attempt to reveal Ayah’s feelings—her pain—or to give her a voice. Instead, it [the scene] dramatizes her abduction as a visual spectacle” (73). A similar absence of voice is conveyed when Ayah expresses her desire to go back to India. Although Lenny hears Ayah speaking literally her mutilated cords convey the absence of agency and loss of identity. In expressing her desire to go home she says that she is “not alive” indicating an end to the prior links she had with life and the new brutal meanings that are now associated with her body (220). While Ice-Candy man used Ayah’s body to make money, the female body also served various other purposes during partition such as the patriarchal satisfaction of mutilating the body of the ‘other’ woman.

The ‘other’ woman in this case refers to any woman whose religion is different from the male perpetrator. Partition placed all women at the same level. Ayah is a representation of Muslim and Sikh women along with Hindu women. Because of the patriarchal exploitation of religion and its usage as an excuse for inciting violence against women, the

violence of partition itself gets played out on women's bodies. Drawing on some of the violence depicted in historical events of the 1947 period, Sidhwa has Ice-Candy man bring the news of a mass murder: "A train from Gurdaspur has just come in,' he announces, panting. 'Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslims. *There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts!*'" (emphasis mine 131). The arrival of women's breasts in a bag makes a statement about the people who committed this atrocity. Since the train carried Muslim passengers only, the absence of women's bodies shows that their war trauma does not come with a simple solution of death. Gill Hague in the article "Violence against Women in War and Conflict" (2016) writes that "women are often raped during conflict in order to humiliate their male relatives – their husbands and families. Report after report describes women being raped and tortured in front of their husbands, and even their children" (Hague 1). Women's bodies, therefore, become sites of torture and barbarity, and the satisfaction leading to victory lies in the knowledge that these bodies are of those who practice a different religion. Partition provides Ice-Candy man with the justification and the power to control Ayah which otherwise would not have been possible. The intersection of patriarchy and religion justified all forms of abuse and torture against women. While Ice-Candy man creates a façade of protection by changing Ayah's religious identity, he drains her of life by making her sleep with other men while completely denying the losses Ayah experiences. For him, Ayah's "past is behind her . . . but now she has everything to live for" (220). The *now* that is full of hope for Ice-Candy man, does not exist for Ayah. She is haunted by the promise of the past (which was inclusive) and the events of the present (which are exclusive).

Ayah's character in *Cracking India* therefore depicts two things: the shifts in perspectives about the sacredness of the female body between pre-partition time and after; and how the religious nature of the partition formed a backdrop and justification for the humiliation and mutilation of the female body which is 'othered' by religion. The events of partition provided Ice-Candy man with the means of using Ayah's Hindu identity to possess her which was initially not possible. The narrative conveys that Ayah's "abduction as a 'Hindu woman' is less about her dishonour as a Hindu for Ice-Candy Man, and more about Ice-Candy Man's use of the communal narratives at hand to fulfill his desire for her" (Daiya 77). It was not the act of cleansing the neighborhood of Hindus that prompted Ice-Candy to join the mob; rather for him, it was the partition and divisions between religious communities that it engendered that gave him the patriarchal authority and the opportunity to take Ayah. Along with this, we see that Lenny's "off-centre view highlights how the women's suffering is both the result of the brutality of their abductors and the ostracization they experience when they are 'recovered'" (Didur 73). Through her mini-narrative, Lenny allows a close and intimate look at pre-partition Ayah and the later unfamiliar Ayah. Lenny shows that for Ayah, Ice-Candy man's pimping was not prostitution but rape, and this takes us to a discussion of the next theme which is associated with religion and women during partition: rape.

***What the Body Remembers* (2000) and the Politics of Religion**

By focusing on Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (2000) the analysis in this section focuses on the prior patriarchal groundwork of constructing the female victim

that facilitates in enforcing marginalization and the understanding of their submissiveness upon women. While *Cracking India* presents Ayah in her youth, *What the Body Remembers* begins with the early years of Roop's life. In presenting Roop's growing age, the novel brings attention to the religious stories girls are made to listen to as opposed to the stories of war and valor that are reserved for boys. I argue that the presence of religious stories in women's lives (such as Roop's early years) presents the patriarchal groundwork that prepares women like Roop for submission and sacrifice while also answering why events like abduction were utterly traumatic for women like Ayah. I also suggest that while Ayah mostly remained a silent figure, Roop forces men to present their patriarchal narrative of religious honour and murder creating a counter-narrative for women who were literally silenced by the patriarchal notion of religious honour. Roop can be seen as the sole representative of women's voices during partition. In terms of religious stories, the analysis will focus on the reception of Ram and Sita and the resulting repercussions of this religious narrative on understanding the sanctity of the female body. As women's bodies became sites of religious struggle, the role of honour and its association with the female body rose to dominance during partition.

In *What the Body Remembers* the lives of its characters are shaped around their religious identities. Roop, the protagonist of the novel, and her sister Madani are constantly reminded of the attributes of good Sikh girls and are instructed to behave accordingly. The insistence on Roop for "listening and obeying like a good-good sweet-sweet girl" plays a strong role in shaping her personality (Baldwin 1352). Kanchan Mathur in his article "Body

as Space, Body as Site” (2008) talks about the perception and connotations associated with bodily integrity in India. Mathur states that in the Indian context, “woman’s body is a space where culturally coded and socially sanctioned norms of the desirable woman are inscribed” (55). This process holds immense importance because it “inculcate[s] in girls the appropriate codes of conduct including self-effacement and self-denial and to train them to see their life primarily in terms of service to others” (55). Roop, her sister, Madani, and her sister-in-law, Kusum depict the inscription of cultural and religious norms in their bodies. These women are taught to behave as Sikh girls obedient to the males in their family. Having instilled these ideals in her mind, Roop’s family marries her to a Sikh man twice her age whose first wife could not produce any children. This marriage provides much needed help to Roop’s financially- burdened father while in return, Sardarji (Roop’s husband) gets the surety “that [his] sons come from a girl [he] know[s] has not been used before” (2393). Roop, on the other hand, gets the pleasure of being married. Sardarji is a modern man and is in love with everything British. He commands authority and his financial status is enough to help Roop ignore the twenty-six years age gap between them. The only thing that matters is that “Sardarji is a man who has never needed to pray for rain or gamble his seed to land where it may” which is enough to explain his position in the world (2211).

The novel gradually moves toward the time of partition when religion plays a more significant role in the lives of characters. The differences between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs become more prominent as the land becomes divided into Pakistan and India. While Roop does not experience the horrors of partition firsthand, she gets exposed to the various

stories of death, displacement, and trauma. Though the men remain busy thinking about the changing political situation, burdened by questions regarding a Hindu or Muslim majority in India, the women, on the other hand, are positioned as only needing to think about saving themselves from the dangers posed by other men. *What the Body Remembers* is therefore about the memories held by the body, especially women's bodies, and the things they are expected to remember and the practices they must adhere to.

What the Body Remembers conveys the relationship between Roop and her religion through storytelling. The art of storytelling depends a lot on the kind of story being told and its teller. In some contexts, the stories told involve gendering of values. Asamoah-Poku (2024) in talking about the importance of storytelling in preserving Ghanaian folklore comments that “storytelling is viewed not only as a form of entertainment but also as a tool for imparting moral values [and] reinforcing societal norms” (310). This was particularly true during the pre-partition era when religious stories of valor and courage were told; for example, of Gurus and prophets that would motivate young boys to follow their footsteps, and which were meant to guide them in staying true to their religions. On the other hand, young girls were told stories of sacredness and fate. Roop and her brother Jeevan also had their share of listening to the stories told by the elders in the house. K. Venkata Lakshmi and G. Chenna Reddy in their article “Subaltern Aspects in Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* (2021) examines Roop’s character as a subaltern. Lakshmi and Reddy, while talking about the importance of storytelling in the novel comments that “the role of stories, whether in painting, poetry, or other oral narratives, then, is to consolidate a

particular” (34). Roop is aware of the significance of these tales, and she knows that in Ram and Sita’s story, she had to mirror Sita’s sacrificing nature in her life. She knows that “stories are not told for the telling, stories are told for the teaching” (5673). Ruvani Ranasinha in the book *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women’s Fiction* (2016) explains that “*What the Body Remembers* ... emphasise[s] the creation of collective memory and the role of storytelling in reinforcing and shaping the sense of shared suffering” (33). While Jeevan listens to war stories, Roop’s ears are flooded with religious stories of the Hindu god Ram, and his wife, Sita. Ilaria Boncori and Kristin Samantha Williams (2023) explain that “the inclusion (or lack thereof) of certain perspectives, voices and experiences is then crucial to the understanding of who we are, and the shaping of our futures, both individually and collectively” (23). Throughout her life, Roop was exposed to perspectives that highlighted Sita’s sacrificing nature. Roop was made to believe that her life should mirror that of Sita’s since being a woman Roop was expected to make sacrifices Sita did. Despite the dominance of Sita’s stories in Roop’s life, Roop was always conscious of Ram’s presence in Sita’s life. Whenever she is expected to sacrifice like Sita, she thinks of Ram’s mistrust despite Sita’s flawless character.

The presence of religious stories (such as Ram and Sita) prepared many girls to sacrifice their bodies during partition. Roop’s character depicts the patriarchal and psychological groundwork girls and women were exposed to that made them accept violence against their bodies during partition. While *Cracking India* presents Ayah’s predicament resulting from her connection with the outside world, *What the Body Remembers*

domesticates the violence against women and lays the groundwork through religious stories that Roop and other women like her listen to. Kavita Daiya (2008) helpfully states that “writers like ... Shauna Singh Baldwin identify and address violence, especially gendered violence, in places where it is not normally seen—the home, domestic spaces, private lives” (98). In doing so the novel “link[s] the apparently singular Partition violence to the parallel forms of domestic and political violence that inhabit the domesticity of national history” (98). The presence of religious stories in the lives of women presents this domestication that further penetrates into the violence of partition. Equating women, like Roop, with Sita meant expecting women to offer similar kinds of sacrifice while eliminating the human factor. The story of Ram and Sita in the novel and Roop’s engagement with it highlights the prior religious knowledge women were made to believe – knowledge that placed the burden of protecting religion on the female body through the patriarchal politicization of religion. Roop presents her understanding of patriarchal discourse after her sister-in-law’s death and through this understanding, she finds loopholes in the dominant patriarchal discourse that marginalizes the female figure. Based on the patriarchal religious knowledge, Sita is meant to guide Roop to accept her subordination as a woman. While Roop learns all this throughout her life, it is only after her sister-in-law’s death that she can see the woman as the marginalized figure – a marginalized status that results from a patriarchal religious narrative.

While Ayah’s connection with patriarchal religion becomes dominant during her abduction, Roop experiences patriarchal influence when she marries Sardarji. Roop’s marriage at the age of sixteen is one of the ways her family ensures her smooth psychological

transition from being a girl to being a woman. In pre-partition times early marriages were a common tradition among families so that girls are married off in a state of innocence. The sharper or more critically engaging they become, the more they tend to challenge patriarchal and traditional norms. Roop, despite her innocence, questions patriarchal values but never challenges them. Marriage was an important part of Roop's household and as soon as Roop turned twelve, her desire for a new home and fear of staying in her current state gradually increased. Her aunty Revati Bhua is a living embodiment of loneliness that Roop would never want to experience; "Revati Bhua is just a poor relation, a woman whose *kismet* left her unmarried, a guest in Papaji's house" (506). Here *kismet* refers to fate, and Roop has long been haunted by the fear of her bad *kismet*. Therefore, marriage is not only a solution to loneliness but also a way of making a statement that Roop is safe from bad fate. Most importantly, Sita was married to Ram and to fulfill her role as a woman, Roop must have a Ram too. Her first lesson comes after Roop is forced to give her firstborn to Sardarji's first wife: "Sardarji's suggestion is to assist her in learning his wishes, every woman is a Sita to her Ram, and what Ram wants, Sita will enjoy doing" (2939). Shamika Shabnam (2018) comments that "with manifold paradigms, omissions, and interpretations, the *Rāmāyaṇa* [tale of Ram and Sita] is in a continuum flux of re-mythologization that articulates the alternate conceptualizations of the characters within the epic" (2). While it began with Roop's understanding of the importance of marriage, Ramayana's relevance soon shifts towards women's sacrifice during partition which is depicted through Kusum's (Roop's sister-in-law) ordeal. As a cultural religious text, Ramayana is interpreted differently, and with emphasis on

different aspects, depending on the present need – in case of partition Ramayana served patriarchal notions of religious honour.

While political territories were marked on a map after Partition, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh men marked their territories on women's bodies by instilling fear in 'the other' which was also a means for declaring one's superiority and power. Apart from mutilating women's bodies, another practice that ensured their desecration was rape. Chandni Saxena (2014) describes rape as an "act which, in a single blow, destroyed the self-esteem of a woman, the honour of the community and the prestige of the family. It is an overt assertion of the man's identity and the simultaneous humiliation of the other community by 'dishonouring' its women" (1257). We see this understanding of rape in Ayah during the time of her abduction. While Ayah is being abducted, Lenny describes her "staring at [the family] as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes" (Sidhwa 160). The terror in Ayah's eyes depicts her understanding of the impending disaster. She knows that the careless handling of men foreshadows their multiple blows that not only rob her of her self-esteem but also drain her of life. While Ayah is raped and used by Ice-Candy man for his own desire, Roop's brother, Jeevan, classifies rape as a form of communication where "rape is one man's message to another: 'I took your pawn. Your move'" (7652). When Roop reaches India and waits for her husband coming from Pakistan, she reflects on the tales of horror:

The tales fly—naked Sikh women were forced by Muslims to dance before mosques. Naked Muslim women were forced by Sikhs to dance in the compound of the Golden

Temple in Amritsar. Perhaps Huma was among them, who knows? Everywhere on this platform, women pull the remnants of rags about their breasts (7447).

The only motivation for committing these kinds of atrocities was the patriarchal association of religious honour with the female body. Veena Das in her book *Life and Words* (2006) questions the consideration of violence as ordinary. Das comments that “the violence of the Partition was about inscribing desire on the bodies of women ... victory or defeat in war was ultimately inscribed on the bodies of women” (52). The imagery of the body in the novel, therefore, highlights tales of multiple women for whom patriarchal violence was enacted upon the body. Along with Kusum, Ayah’s body also remembers the trauma of abduction and rape. Women therefore became markers of patriarchal and religious oppression. Anyone who differed from the ‘self’ became the ‘other’ and thus a potential target. Religious differences surpassed political and national ones. Leaving a mark on the bodies of women was the ultimate form of achievement. Shweta Kushal in her article “Mnemonic Body of the Female Subject” (2015) comments that Baldwin’s novel “uses the body itself as a mnemonic device, something that can be marked ... and imprint[ed] upon” (160). The memory of the body in Baldwin’s novel is the horror of partition for women. Similarly, the female body in Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) also serves as a site of memory, bearing the imprints of Partition’s horror. Although partition was highly challenging and an uncomfortable experience for both Indians and Pakistanis, women were doubly challenged. Butalia presents the merging of the metanarrative of patriarchy with religion where

patriarchal and religious honour became tied to representations of and material relations to the female body.

In this narrative, men emerge as active agents and religious and nationalist advocates. Protecting the honour of their religion was one of the burdens they had to bear. A significant number of women “had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at Partition . . . Many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of the ‘other’ religion” (Butalia 132). Along with this, women’s bodies were used to contaminate and defile the ‘other’ race. This was achieved by forcing women “to have sex with men of other religion” (Butalia 132). Women’s bodies, therefore, became a target from all sides. Men of other religions raped them, and family members killed them to save religious honour.

The novel’s most profound and emotionally challenging section is one that represents the politics of religion and its intersection with patriarchal notions of religious honour in its most crude form. Kusum’s death is narrated by two male figures: her husband, Jeevan, and her father-in-law, Bachan Singh. Roop first learns about Kusum, her sister-in-law, from her brother, Jeevan: “A woman’s body lay beneath [the white sheet covering the body], each limb severed at the joint. This body was sliced into six parts, then arranged to look as if she were whole again . . . He swallowed, moved closer to see her face. ‘It was my Kusum’” (7645). Jeevan discovers Kusum’s body in their home. The body is cut, and all the parts are placed together. The other members of the family [Jeevan’s father and children] have left for a safe place, but Kusum lies in the room – dead. Jeevan’s hatred and anger are directed

toward his religious ‘other’, believing that a Muslim or a Hindu might be the culprit. For Jeevan Kusum’s body becomes a message sent by the ‘other’ as an opponent does in a game of chess: “I took your pawn. Your move” (7652). The pawn being a dispensable, minor object is used by the opponent to make a move. In terms of the novel, this move is Kusum’s rape as per Jeevan’s reading of her body. The pawn is Kusum herself – minor and indispensable. Jeevan

received the message. Kusum’s womb, the same from which his three sons came, had been delivered. Ripped out. And the message, “We will stamp your kind, your very species from existence. This is no longer merely about izzat or land ... We take the womb so there can be no Sikhs from it, we take the womb, leave you its shell” (7663).

Jeevan’s reading of Kusum’s death places him at the center while seeing Kusum as a body. On the other hand, we see Lenny’s description of Ayah when she meets Ayah at Ice-Candy man’s place at the end of the novel. Lenny’s describes Ayah as looking “achingly lovely” (Sidhwa 220). Unlike Jeevan, Lenny allows the reader to look at Ayah. Jeevan sees Kusum’s body as a battleground used by men of a different religion to convey a message. Shweta Kushal (2015) explains that in the case of Jeevan’s view of Kusum, she matters “only as a mother of the species and a repository of honour, else she is but a shell. Without the womb her purpose in life is lost” (163). For Jeevan, Kusum’s body becomes a literal bearer of religion.

Building on the two narrations of her death, Bachan Singh offers the second account, providing a different perspective that adds depth to the understanding of her final moments. While rape was an act to dishonour and assume power over the 'other', another factor that led to the victimization of women, while men sorted their self/other power structure, was women's killing by their own kin. This was mainly done to *protect* them from being killed, or worse still, from being raped by men who belonged to other religious communities – as Bachan Singh did to *protect* Kusum. Urvashi Kaushal in her article “Women as Metaphor” (2017) highlights women's perspective when chaos ensued during partition. Kaushal states that the woman was seen as “a metaphor for the patriarchal family honour or the ‘izzat of the quom’ [who had] to be protected from the ‘other’ ... Her body was seen as the property of her husband ... when communal riots broke out, the property and the woman had to be protected” (87). Roop recalled a man saying: ‘I made martyrs of seventeen women and children in my family before their izzat [honour] could be taken’ (Baldwin 7440). To save women from being raped by the ‘other’, most men killed their women eliminating the source that would put these men at the periphery through lost religious honour. In this case, the source is a woman. Eliminating her would ensure that men's honour remains intact while they remain in power. This allowed men to exploit religion to justify violence against women. Menon and Bhasin (1988), while talking about the killing of one's own, explain that the notion of protecting women's honour was so dominant “that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their own daughters or sisters and their own selves” (44).

Kusum's sacrifice underscores the brutal reality of patriarchal violence inflicted in the name of religion in which men like Bachan Singh attempted to protect patriarchal honour through women's bodies. Kusum paid the price of such a sacrifice where she serves as the source ready to be eliminated by her kin. Here Kusum's readiness mirrors Sita's sacrificing nature. Kanchan Mathur explains that while "the expectation of bravery or 'macho' behaviour in men gets interpreted and accepted as the right to inflict violence", on the part of women "the acceptance of violence" becomes the norm and a statement of their obedience and chastity (55). Kusum, as a receptor of religious stories like Roop, accepts her role as a Sita-like woman prepared to die to save the honour of patriarchal religion. Roop's father does the deed. In this case, Roop's father becomes *the* patriarchal oppression that creates a female victim – Kusum, similar to Ice-Candy man's creation of Ayah – the victim. Her father narrates:

'I called to Kusum—she was on the terrace ... I took her into my sitting room and I told her what Sant Puran Singh said we Sikhs must do, and that I had to do it now. She understood. Always she made no trouble. She said I should take her into the front room, your mama's room, so her sons, on the terrace with Revati Bhua, should hear no cry from her lips.' *Revati Bhua was right—Papaji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour* 'In your mama's room, I said the first lines of the Japji to give me strength, and to guide my kirpan. Then she turned her back so I should not see her face, took off her chunni to bare her neck before me.

And then ...I raised my kirpan high above her head. Vaheguru did not stop it; it came down' (emphasis original 7825).

The above quote highlights two important aspects: Kusum's willing sacrifice and Bachan Singh's way of protecting Kusum from the 'other'. Kusum offers herself without resistance because she has been trained for obedience all her life. Kushal (2015) comments that Kusum's acceptance of Bachan Singh's choice of killing her is because "it has been ingrained in her that good girls never say 'nahinji' or 'no-ji'" (163). Since women like Roop and Kusum grow up learning obedience, the act of refusing is alien to them. While Ayah is brutally removed from Lenny's house against her will, Kusum offers a willing sacrifice. Another interesting aspect here is the idea of 'protection' which is a dominant factor in Bachan Singh's dismembering of his daughter-in-law. Bachan Singh's act of killing Kusum was his way of ensuring that his religious honour remained intact. We see a similar act of protection in *Cracking India* by Ice-Candy man. While talking to Lenny's Godmother he claims: "We protect our women. We marry our girls ourselves. No one dare lay a finger on them!" (259). In an attempt to keep Ayah with him, Ice-Candy man marries her when the search for lost and abducted women takes place. Displaying his newfound 'protection' for Ayah, he claims that he would "do anything to undo the wrong done to her" (262). He tells Godmother that "no one has touched her [Ayah] since [their] nikah [marriage]," and he "can't exist without her" (262). The idea of protection here serves patriarchal purposes in both cases. While Ice-Candy man tries to revive Ayah because he needs her body, Bachan Singh dismembers the body so it cannot be used by anyone else.

What the Body Remembers highlights the plight of women who became doubly victimized: first because they belonged to a particular religion and secondly because they were women. During times of war, women and children are the most vulnerable and those who supported the division of the sub-continent utilized the narrative of honour to further their political agendas. Kusum died at the hands of her people serving the purpose of patriarchal religious honour rather than her own needs - an honour that patriarchal religion had defined for her, and she had to be a passive observer until her death made her a victim. While Kusum's lack of voice portrayed her agreement and acceptance of death, Ayah's absence of voice depicted a loss of agency and control over her body. For Kusum, the political and patriarchal need to protect religious honour surpassed familial relations. Without having the knowledge of Kusum's murderer her death create uncertainty for Jeevan. Jeevan contemplates her acceptance of death but fails to make sense of her compliance. He asks: "She looked accepting [...]. Almost as if she had been dismembered by her own hand. Can a woman ask for someone to do this to her? How can she actually desire it, move to her captor with a smile on her lips?" (7652). Her acceptance connects us back to the teachings Roorp received about Ram and Sita. That is, the idea that women are subservient to the male members of their family was instilled in Kusum as well. She has to perform her role as Sita and as such any element of choice is automatically eliminated. For Kusum, it is not a matter of choice but of obedience and her forced death becomes inevitable because the burden of protecting religious honour is placed on her shoulders, and her father-in-law makes sure that religious honour is protected at the expense of Kusum's body.

The association of honour with the female body during partition depicted the patriarchal exploitation of religion to victimize women. During partition raping women was equivalent to making them impure to harm their religion. The concept of purity and honour became two sides of the same coin and associating the female figure with this narrative became a service to one's religion and a blow to the other's religion. Bharati Ray (2005) coining the term "power rape" explain that rape was meant to be seen as "significant because the rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs" (xxxiv). Since men become the protectors of religious honour, killing 'other' women as well as their own is at once justified. The theme of honour and purity goes hand in hand. Once impure, the woman has to die because she is no longer honourable. However, if she remains pure, she has to be killed by her own people so that she can be saved from becoming impure and thus losing her honour. Death seems to be a woman's fate in this context.

Roop's Mini-narrative

Roop and Kusum's connection with their religion is dominated by their interpretation of the story of Ram and Sita which is heavily patriarchal. Roop raises questions about the portrayal of Sita, although she does so to herself, silently, without giving voice to her thoughts. As opposed to Lenny's loud and clear mini-narrative, Roop's mini-narrative is hushed. In creating her mini-narrative, Roop uses the method of storytelling that she had grown up with. She inverts the patriarchal narrative by using the tools used by patriarchy to instill submission to patriarchal control in women. Lakshmi and Reddy (2021) helpfully point out that "the act of story-telling is important for Baldwin as well as her protagonist Roop as it

gives the author as well as her character a voice, lets them break out of the silence they have been conditioned into” (34). Through her whispered mini-narrative, Roop exposes the loopholes in Ram and Sita’s story while also highlighting the repercussions of patriarchally tailored religious stories on the lives of women during partition. This silence is expected of girls her age and Roop’s body is conditioned to remember it. While she questions Sardarji’s demands of giving away her children, she makes sure her husband does not hear her challenges:

This is a fire test, the kind of test Ram asked Sita to take when he became unsure that Sita was worthy to be his queen. Roop’s test is not like Sita’s—Sardarji does not ask for an agnipariksha, a walk through fire. But, unlike Sita, who was a goddess and so pure she could not fail . . . Roop could fail this test because she isn’t good-good sweet-sweet as Sita (2954).

In terms of following and accepting patriarchal connotations in religious stories, Roop represents other women [such as Kusum] who were forced to remain silent because of the patriarchal association of religious honour with the female body. Similar to Roop’s understanding of religion, women during partition believed in patriarchal connotations of religion that associated honour and sacrifice with the female body. The theme of silent women is quite dominant in the literature on partition. In his discussion of the period Ian Talbot (1999) mentions that “in this great human event, human voices are strangely silent” (228). While the voices of men have been heard in explorations about the rationale for partition and so as to “apportion blame for the related massacres,” women’s voices mainly

remained silent, and, where possible, they were silenced (Talbot 228). Roop has learned this silence through the story of Sita.

Patriarchal silencing forces Kusum to prepare for death and in the case of Roop it depicts awareness of forced silencing. Unlike men, women cannot declare their religious allegiances. These allegiances are defined for them, although they must live with the consequences and keep up with what it demands of them. While religion is a public matter it has to be authorised or maintained by the heads of the family, in the private realm. Despite being wrongly accused of adultery, Sita remains a silent figure and instead of challenging the accusations made against her, she welcomes death. Roop and Kusum's position depicts this trajectory of silence in the novel. While Kusum's silence indicates her compliance in being dismembered, Roop sees the loopholes in religious stories and presents them as a hushed mini-narrative. She tells Sardarji that the story of Ram and Sita as depicted by their elders is only half true. They tend to skip the part that shows

How Ram rejected Sita, innocent though she was, because a mere washerman suggested that in her time as Ravan's hostage, Sita might have become impure. And how Sita shamed him for all time, outdoing him in performing her duty. But everyone knows the story ... how Sita called upon the labia of the earth to open wide again, take her back within them, how Sita walked into the maw of the earth with her eyes wide open and her izzat intact, dying of her own will, the same way she was born (Baldwin 4405).

The thin line between Roop's silence and her subdued inner voice is what exposes the absurdity of patriarchal connotations associated with religion and creates her mini-narrative. The tug of war between the things that she has to do (because religion says so or it is what Sardarji expects of her), and her own interpretations of those narratives is constant. However, Roop does not voice these concerns to other characters. While Roop has her inner voice, Kusum is denied all forms of agency. Lucia-Mihaela Grosu-Rădulescu in the article "Objectification of Women and Violence in *What the Body Remembers*" (2016) highlights that "the two male voices that narrate Kusum's death, Jeevan's and Bachan Singh's, reduce her very existence to a site for masculine conflict and representation. Her extreme suffering is missing from the male discourse" (93). Sita had to go through the ordeal of fire to prove her innocence and Kusum has to mirror that sacrifice by giving her life to prove herself as a good Sikh girl.

Roop's subdued inner voice plays an important role in the novel. While the religious stories of Ram and Sita present a mini-narrative explaining the preparation of women as Sita, Roop's interactions with the reader also present another mini-narrative in which she develops her third space. Through the sharing of her thoughts with the reader, Roop creates a position (her third space) where she can understand the patriarchal discourse of marginalizing and victimizing women that exploits the idea of religious honour. In doing so, Roop also conveys an alternate version of Kusum's death while exposing the loopholes in the patriarchal version (Jeevan and Bachan Singh's). Pinky Sarma in her article "Metaphorising the Body in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*" (2016) focuses on the metaphorical

interpretations generated by the violated female body in the novel. Sarma comments that “the feminist intervention of the metaphorical interpretations of violence of the ‘female body’ lays bare the complexities of male ideologies” allowing Roop to doubt the narrative of willing sacrifice presented by men about the women of her household (110). While Roop resides at the center of the novel, her voice remains hushed in comparison to the male characters. However, Roop finds ways to communicate her inner thoughts and in doing so gives agency to Kusum’s body through the act of remembering her. Olivier Harenda in the article “Git-Mit, Git-Mit Talk”: A Woman’s Perspective on The Partition of India” (2017) talks about Baldwin’s representation of the events of partition. Harenda comments that “with Kusum’s story, the author emphasises that only through the process of remembering do female victims survive” (266). While Roop’s mini-narrative about Kusum’s death punctures the patriarchal narrative and keeps Kusum alive, Ayah also creates a mini-narrative by rejecting Ice-Candy man’s attempts at mitigating the damage caused by abduction, and in doing so she rejects the patriarchal discourse and creates her own space. Kavita Daiya explains that “Ayah’s body acquires its history of alterity in her rejection of Ice-Candy Man’s desperate overtures of love. Ayah refuses to forget her abduction and rape and rejects his offers of love and romantic coupledness—in other words, of respectability after rape” (74). In doing so, Ayah not only challenges patriarchal control but also decides for herself by telling Godmother that she wants to go back to her family. This also marks her attempt at reclaiming some of her lost identity which was robbed from her through abduction and then the change of religion.

On the other hand, for Kusum, Roop inverts the patriarchal discourse. The story regarding Kusum's body and her death is narrated to Roop by two men: her father, Bachan Singh, and her brother, Jeevan. Although both versions are meant to narrate Kusum's last hour, they differ remarkably and Roop's inner voice conveys this to the reader creating a mini-narrative. When Jeevan entered his home, he saw "pots rolled past dried pools of their contents, like the severed heads of martyrs" (6593). The imagery that Jeevan recounts mirrors the stories he had heard from Bachan Singh as a young boy. Upon seeing Kusum's dismembered body, Jeevan realizes that he has been given a message by the other: "We take the womb so there can be no Sikhs from it, we take the womb, leave you its shell" (7762). For Jeevan, Kusum was now a mere body that conveyed a message and challenged his honour. Looking at the body he wondered "Why were her legs not bloody? To cut a woman apart without first raping—a waste, surely" (7653). Deepti Misri's reading of the novel in her article "The Violence of Memory" (2011) helpfully identifies the presence of women's narration within the patriarchal narrative in the novel. Talking about Jeevan's reading of Kusum's body, Misri explains that

Underlying his statements is a sure understanding that rape is a violation between men, "one man's message to another," rather than an embodied violation against the woman in question. The certitude with which Jeevan looks for, finds and "reads" the message in the mutilated body betrays his perfect acquiescence to the patriarchal terms on which such brutal violence against women acquires significance as a semiotic rather than an embodied act, such that it is the male recipients of the

message who become the victims of the violent act, rather than the women whose bodies were made to bear the violent inscription (11).

Jeevan's analysis of Kusum's body depicts his punctured religious honour. While he confesses that he is hurt, it is not for Kusum but rather his own self: "My heart was full of grief and anger from the message that came to me in my woman's body—Kusum's body" (7725).

Roop's mini-narrative conveys the nuances in Jeevan's testimony and takes a critical approach to his reading of Kusum's body. Highlighting patriarchal dominance through fractured reading, Roop thinks: "*Even in death he can see Kusum only from the corners of his eyes. For how can he know, how does he know, if she was raped or not, when he has heard the same stories I have heard?*" (emphasis original 7725). Listening to Jeevan's version, Roop decides to keep Kusum – the woman – alive in her memory. Without seeing Kusum as a token of patriarchal religious honour, Roop informs the reader that she "*must remember*, thinks Roop. *I must remember Kusum's body*. Roop will remember Kusum's body, re-membered" (7735). As opposed to Kusum's dismembered body, Roop chooses to re-member which indicates Roop's attempt to piece together the memory of Kusum's body, both literally and metaphorically. Roop's choice to re-member also reflects the desire to reclaim identity and restore agency in a patriarchally charged environment that aims to fragment the female self. Misri comments that women's narratives such as Roop's "suggest a model for skeptical *listening*" (emphasis original 9). Women's narratives puncture and challenge the "male narratives in order to make space for the muted perspectives of women with regard to

gendered violence within the family and significantly, they caution the reader to approach the men's accounts with the same skepticism that is manifest in Roop's reception of them" (9). The presence of Roop's subdued voice gives agency to Kusum and presents Kusum as a woman rather than a commodity sacrificed to protect patriarchal religious honour. Roop's "retelling not only makes them [women] audible but also offers a gendered history of partition that provides a counter narrative" (Kushal 164). In presenting her mini-narrative Roop develops a third space in which she remains an active agent in engaging with and questioning the patriarchal discourse surrounding Kusum's death. Along with Kusum, Roop also looks for other female members of the family such as Revati Bhua and Gujri [their maidservant]. Bachan Singh informs her Revati Bhua gave herself to the Muslim mob. According to Bachan Singh "Revati Bhua was old, if her izzat went, *what man would feel dishonoured?* Gujri was already a widow, long past childbearing age (emphasis mine 7801). Bachan Singh and Jeevan's stories are connected at the patriarchal level. Both the men considered women dispensable items. Roop's narrative constantly "punctured" the stories of these men. She remained an active agent voicing the plight of women.

Vaheguru, send Kusum back to this family in her next life! Let her tell her story herself remember this death herself for I am not worthy to tell it! How will I tell This-one and That-one [Kusum's children], but with Papaji's words? How will I ask her sons to know her pain when they learn to see as men see, like horses, blind to what lies directly before their eyes? (emphasis original 7838).

This statement from Roop highlights the importance of authenticity of voice. Roop invokes *Vaheguru* seeking divine intervention that allows Kusum to her own story. This plea highlights the importance of Kusum's voice in presenting an authentic version of her death that disrupts Jeevan's and Bachan Singh's patriarchal narrative. This also portrays Roop's desire for Kusum's right to self-narrate – a mini-narrative that presents Kusum's experiences in her voice rather than silenced or appropriated. Apart from focusing on the authenticity of Kusum's experience, Roop also considers herself unworthy of narrating the events. This can denote the presence of patriarchal limitations on women's narratives in a way that hinders women's ability to tell their stories through the glorification and privileging of patriarchal narratives. Chandra Mohanty (1984) asserts that it is crucial to understand how we recover and claim those marginal voices that resist the colonial and patriarchal discourses of silence. Roop's mini-narrative presented an alternate version where she questions what is constructed in contrast to "what lies directly before the eyes". It is through her awareness of the loopholes in the religious stories of Ram and Sita she grew up listening that she was able to realize Ram's fault. The narratives that were constructed by men were deconstructed by Roop to produce a version that connects with the lives of women sacrificed in the name of patriarchal religious honour.

Manto and the Politics of Religion

Building on the previous discussions of women's voices and bodies as both sites of resistance and patriarchal violence, we now turn to Manto, where the silence and death of women take on a haunting significance. While Ayah's protest in Sidhwa and Roop's re-membering of

Kusum's body illustrate active forms of resistance and memory, Manto's portrayal of women often centers on the unspeakable—those whose bodies are reduced to passive witnesses or victims, unable to voice their suffering. In contrast to the acts of “re-membering” seen previously, Manto's stories highlight a continuum of women whose bodies are not just silenced but rendered invisible, their memories erased in the violence they endure. This shift invites reflection on the different ways women's bodies carry witness to trauma—whether through voicing, remembering, or the cruel absence of both. Manto’s stark depiction of women on the margins offers a poignant exploration of this silence, serving as a dark counterpoint to the earlier acts of reclaiming agency. This section argues that by bearing witness to the violence against them, women’s bodies became a means of presenting an alternate narrative.

The inclusion of Saadat Hasan Manto in this dissertation, despite its primary emphasis on women’s standpoint and the privileging of marginalized female voices, is a deliberate and strategic choice aimed at complicating and expanding the discussion on patriarchy. While the project foregrounds women’s narratives, Manto’s work offers a critical male-authored perspective that challenges dominant patriarchal ideologies from within. As a literary outcast himself – condemned and censored for his unflinching depictions of sexual violence, trauma, and the female body during Partition – Manto occupies a marginal position that allows him to critique the very systems of gendered and communal violence he represents. His stories do not speak over women but rather foreground their suffering and agency within a deeply fractured socio-political landscape. Including Manto enables a cross-

examination of patriarchy from multiple angles, revealing how even male voices, when situated on the margins, can expose the brutality and contradictions of patriarchal control. His representation of the female body as a contested site of violence and agency during Partition adds another layer to this dissertation's exploration of how trauma disrupts normative gender roles and opens space for alternative narratives.

The manifestation of partition on the female body presented itself in multiple forms. Violence against women's bodies materialized through the killing of women by one's own kin (to protect patriarchal honour), and rape was another prominent theme focusing on violence against women's bodies (to violate and dishonour the religion of the *other*). In connection to the narrative of partition, Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) is a prominent name. Manto's short stories and plays covered a variety of themes concerning partition, the condition of women, religion, ethics, and morality. This section will look at Manto's short stories in light of this chapter's main argument: that the division of the subcontinent took place on and within female bodies justified by men using the narrative of religion. This section suggests that the violated female body subverted the patriarchal narrative of honour while assuming a place as the subject in the tale of partition. Although rape was a gruesome act, aimed to victimize and oppress the female figure, the female body instead became a statement against patriarchy and its exploitation of religion. While the previous section portrayed Jeevan's patriarchal reading of Kusum's body for himself, this section will 'read' the violated female body as a testament to the violence committed against it. Unlike Jeevan's self-centered reading, this section confronts the body that bears witness to violence,

demanding a more nuanced and empathetic interpretation of its significance. This argument will be analyzed by looking at the intersection of patriarchy and religion by engaging with themes of women's sexuality, rape, and the agency of the female body. Manto's role is important to consider keeping his literary struggle in mind. Manto was charged with obscenity multiple times because his stories about the partition addressed themes of rape and sex. Some of the notable writers from Pakistan such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz considered Manto's work unworthy. The reason for these charges is quite evident: he was evoking the marginalized figures of society by exposing the absurdity of the religious façade and the reality of women's experiences. Manto's stories present a nuanced picture that allows his readers to understand the plight of women and the role of religion in their lives during the partition. The short stories this section will look into are: "Open It!" (2008), "Mozelle" (2012), and "Sharifan" (2014) to explore the role of the female body and agency in subverting the patriarchal narrative of honour, while presenting a narrative of its own and assuming the position of a subject.

"Open It!" revolves around the time after partition when families have moved to either India or Pakistan and the search for missing persons is in progress. Being Muslims, Sirajuddin and his seventeen-year-old daughter, Sakina, move to Pakistan from Amritsar, but Sakina is lost when they reach Lahore. During the chaos of migration, Sirajuddin looks for his lost daughter. Failing to find her, he reaches out to a group of Muslim men who were rescuing survivors and helping family members look for lost ones. Sirajuddin gives his daughter's description with the hope that the team will be able to retrieve her. Her father

describes Sakina as “fair and very beautiful. She’s about seventeen. Large eyes, black hair, there’s a big beauty spot on her right cheek” (Taseer 44). This description was given to a group of Muslim men who were making efforts to find people lost during migration. Although these men end up finding Sakina, they violate her sexually for days.

In “Sharifan” the story begins with Qasim entering his home and searching for his daughter, Sharifan. Assuming that she must be hiding, he searches the rooms and finally goes to the veranda. Seeing Sharifan lying dead, he forgets the shooting pain in his leg from a gunshot wound resulting from the political and religious unrest. In the courtyard, “barely a yard away, lay the dead body of a young girl [Sharifan] – naked, absolutely naked. Fair complexioned, taut and nubile; the small pert breasts were raised towards the ceiling” (60). Qasim cannot believe his eyes and the pain now shifts towards his head, making him boil with anger. Seeing his daughter naked and violated, “a scream, one that could rent the skies, emerged deep from within his innards but he had pursed his lips so tightly that it could not escape” (60). Being unable to look at his naked daughter’s body, Qasim closes his eyes, looks for a rag, and throws it in Sharifan’s direction not realizing that it does not cover her body but lands beside her. Filled with rage, he picks up his axe and leaves without looking for his wife. On his way out “he did not see his wife’s dead body. It is entirely possible that he could not see it because his eyes were filled with the sight of Sharifan’s *naked* dead body” (emphasis mine 60). In a rage and hysterics, Qasim leaves his home with an axe and kills everyone who crosses his path. After murdering three men on the street, he walks to “a house whose doorway had something written over it in Hindi” and knocks on the door (62). A girl

named Bimla opens it. Seeing Bimla inside, Qasim “thundered, ‘Who are you?’ The girl ran her tongue over dry lips and answered, ‘A Hindu’” (62). Once Qasim realized that she was a Hindu, he let go of his axe and

Like a falcon he pounced upon the girl and shoved her into the verandah. And, then, began to tear her clothes with both his hands like a man possessed. Scraps and shreds of fabric began to fly in all directions as though someone was carding cotton. Qasim remained busy taking his vengeance for about half an hour. The girl offered no resistance because she had become unconscious as soon as she had fallen on the floor (62).

Qasim’s rage emerges when he sees his daughter’s corpse and subsides only when he turns a fourteen-year-old girl into a corpse. While Qasim is busy with the girl, a man approaches and stops him. Looking at the dead girl on the floor the man shuts his eyes and “with his hand over his eyes, he left the house on wobbly legs, muttering ‘Bimla ... Bimla ...’” (63). The story brings together two men in the grief of losing their daughters.

Manto’s short stories address the prevalence of religious identities and their manifestations in various forms in connection to women. The majority of his stories addressed the repercussions of partition and religious dynamics on the female body. There are a few stories that deal with similar themes but adopt more positive connotations. In these cases, women appear in charge of their bodies and possession of agency. They use their religious identities to maneuver the situation in their favor. In the short story “Mozelle”, Manto reveals hidden identities where the fiery spirits of women surpass their religious

identities and they use their bodies as a means of escape, ensuring life rather than confinement and death. Trilochan, the protagonist of the story, falls in love with Mozelle who is described as “a careless, self-centered Jewish girl” who “didn’t care about anyone’s feelings” (162, 166). Trilochan’s perception of Mozelle as self-centered is a prominent descriptor in the story. This is evidenced by his recurring marriage proposals and Mozelle’s repeated rejections on account of his religious attire – his long turbaned hair and beard. Mozelle’s approach towards religion was not restrictive. Her view of Trilochan’s religion explains her own religious approach. When Trilochan questions her on her meetings with her ex-lovers, Mozelle responds by saying “You really *are* a Sikh! Idiot! Who told you we were together? If you’re so concerned about having a lover, go back to wherever you’re from and marry some Sikh girl. I don’t care what you say, I’m not changing” (163). Mozelle’s approach towards religion is more liberating than Trilochan’s. Being a Sikh, Trilochan views her as his honour and Mozelle wants to be a free spirit. She does not believe in associating religion with attire and ideologies. She tells Trilochan “You’re a Sikh. I know you wear those silly baggy underpants. They’re a part of your religion—just like your beard and your hair. You should be ashamed. You’re an adult but still think your religion is hidden in your underpants” (167).

Mozelle’s bold personality and approach allow her to defy the patriarchal norms of religious honour. This gives her the courage to place her naked body between an enraged mob and Trilochan’s fiancée, ultimately saving them from the violence of a religiously charged crowd during the partition. Trilochan places immense value on his turban and beard

and refuses to take his turban off before entering the Muslim neighborhood, Mozelle exchanges her Jewish attire with Kirpal so that she can leave the building as a Jew rather than as a Sikh to save her from the wrath of the mob. In doing so, Mozelle saves the couple at the expense of her own life.

In these briefly summarized short stories, we see some common elements in terms of character classification as was the case with the previously analyzed novels. Each of these stories presents us with (one or multiple) male perpetrator/s creating a female victim and a female presence that inverts and/or challenges the patriarchal narrative by exposing the exploitation of religion during partition. I argue that the female victim is created by the patriarchal sexual objectification of women in a time of transition and chaos that provided men with the justification to inflict violence against women. Moreover, despite the silencing of women by patriarchal figures, women present an alternate narrative through their bodies puncturing the patriarchal metanarrative of honour.

The portrayal of male figures in these short stories highlights their significant, though often indirect, role in shaping the experiences of female characters, either through sexual objectification or by assuming the guise of 'protectors'. In these short stories, we encounter multiple male figures, such as Sakina's father, Sirajuddin, in "*Open It!*", and the young volunteers who help people find their lost family members. Although the reader does not gaze directly at these volunteers, they shape the story in crucial ways. In 'Sharifan', we see Sharifan's father, Qasim, and in 'Mozelle' we have Trilochan, the male protagonist, and the Muslim mob. Except for Sirajuddin, all of these characters play their role in creating the

female victim either through sexual objectification or through their *apparent* role as ‘protectors’.

Patriarchal violence against the female body during the partition manifested in various forms, such as rape as a means of dishonouring the ‘other’ and dismemberment as a way of protecting from the ‘other.’ Manto’s *Open It!* presents yet another distinct manifestation of this brutality by challenging traditional notions of religious boundaries and depicting the sexual objectification of Sakina at the hands of men from the same faith. In Manto’s short story “Open It!”, Sakina is raped by men of the same religion. Through Sakina, Manto relays the tale of the sexual objectification of women that materialized due to the ongoing war between religions and nations. Objectification is roughly defined in terms of degrading someone by reducing them to an object. While objectification itself can take various forms, women are generally objectified in sexual terms which tends to put them at a disadvantage. Sally Haslanger (2012) explains that “if one objectifies something (or someone), one views it and treats it as an object for the satisfaction of one's desire Objectification is not just ‘in the head’; it is actualized, embodied, imposed upon the objects of one's desire” (64). As a result, the one objectified does not merely remain a source of satisfying one’s desire but it also becomes something that can be overpowered and controlled. Haslanger explains that “if one objectifies something . . . one also has the power to make it have the properties one desires it to have” (Haslanger 64-65). The sexual objectification of women during partition was one of the reasons that magnified their atrocities and placed them at the lowest end of the spectrum of living beings.

Sakina was a victim of sexual objectification at the hands of men who were supposed to bring her back to her father. Time and again, Sirajuddin inquires about his daughter and the men comfort him. Manto depicts these men as saviours who “made every effort, even putting their lives on the line. They went to Amritsar and rescued men, women and children, and brought them to safety” (44). Their portrayal as heroes not only makes them reliable but also presents them as protectors and saviors for vulnerable women. Kavita Daiya (2008) explains that “the image of the benevolent men rescuing women of their community is overturned: from protectors of honour, they are now revealed to be abductors and rapists” (84). Belonging to the same religion as Sakina, the men involved in the episodes of rape challenge the classification of violence as communal, presenting it instead as a sex crime, as depicted by Ice-Candy Man's abduction of Ayah. While Ice-Candy man exploited Ayah's different religious identity and presented abduction as a form of communal violence, the volunteers helping Sirajuddin search for Sakina do not burden themselves by hiding the source of patriarchal oppression. Sakina is raped within the boundaries of the new country she has migrated to and instead of Hindu men, she is raped by Pakistani Muslim men. Zehra Mehdi in her article “Remembering Violence and Possibilities of Mourning” (2021) reiterates this idea by saying that the story “challenges the description of Partition violence as essentially a religious conflict – there was no religious difference between the volunteers and Sakina ... The only binary that sustains through the unfolding of violence is the one between men and women” (117). We see this binary unfolding in *What the Body Remembers* when Roop is migrating to India with her children and servants. One of Roop's maidservants, Jorimon, is attacked by men of her own religion. Jorimon's gang rape by her own men makes

Roop question the safety of women: “*If men treat a woman they know to be of their own quom in this cruel way, can any woman be safe*” (emphasis original 7206).

While violence against Sakina presents a case of men with the same religion, we see another religiously charged mob in “Mozelle” aiming to attack a woman of a different religion. In an attempt to save Trilochan’s fiancée, Kirpal Kaur, Mozelle gives the girl her Jewish attire and stands naked in front of the mob. The mob – who represent fundamental religious believers – were equally captivated by Mozelle’s nakedness which allowed Trilochan and Kirpal to escape unnoticed. In her nakedness, Mozelle’s religious identity remains unknown to the mob. During this time the mob is distracted by Mozelle’s body and away from driving Sikhs out of their neighborhood which was their original aim. Such episodes highlight that partition merely provided men with an excuse to unleash patriarchal oppression upon women. Ayesha Jalal addresses a similar idea in *The Pity of Partition* (2013). Jalal comments that Manto in his stories captures the essence of people and their different versions. In Manto’s stories “the perpetrators and the victims of their oppression interest him [Manto] only insofar as they help to lay bare the all-too-human characteristics that can momentarily turn the gentlest of souls into the most demonic monsters” (24). His stories “gave glimpses into the best and worst in humankind” (24). Deconstructing the intersection of religion, nation, and patriarchy, Manto portrays the trauma women endured while also highlighting the tendency of men to inflict traumatic wounds.

The portrayal of father figures in partition-era narratives underscores the complex intersection of patriarchal honour and violence, as exemplified by Qasim’s dual role in

Sharifan as both a father and a perpetrator of rape. Qasim's character highlights the patriarchal construction of honour with the female body suggesting that because of this association, women became potential threats since their bodies were seen as means of preserving one's honour while destroying the other's. Qasim, beginning with the sight of *Sharifan's* naked body and ending with *Bimla's* lifeless body, experiences the loss of his honour and, in a fit of revenge, destroys the *other's* [a Hindu] honour. In the case of Qasim, Jeevan's statement holds: "Rape is one man's message to another: 'I took your pawn. Your move'" (Baldwin 7652). While a message was conveyed to Qasim through *Sharifan*, he conveyed it to a Hindu man through *Bimla*.

One of the reasons that point to Qasim's sense of lost honour was that he was unable to look at *Sharifan* as his daughter. His sight registered a sexual body "absolutely naked. Fair complexioned, taut and nubile" with "small pert breasts" (60). It is interesting to note that Qasim's objective reading of his daughter's body is similar to that of Jeevan's. Telling Roop about Kusum's body, Jeevan states that "her hand was like this- unclenched. Her feet were like this- not poised to run. Her legs cut neatly at the thigh" (7655). Similar to Jeevan, Qasim's rage did not emerge from a sense of loss since the act of shutting his eyes after seeing *Sharifan* portrays his focus on the nakedness he observed. Rather it is the loss of patriarchal religious honour that Jeevan and Qasim mourned. Looking at *Sharifan* in the courtyard blinded him to all other sights and "once outside, he did not see his wife's dead body" (60). The image of *Sharifan's* nakedness stayed with Qasim. After killing three men on the street "he felt disappointed, for perhaps he wanted to die. But, all of a sudden, the

image of Sharifan – naked Sharifan – appeared before his eyes and turned his whole being into a pile of burning gun- powder” (61). The vision of Sharifan’s nakedness removes the identity of Sharifan as a girl and a daughter from Qasim’s mind even though his sense of honour is hurt precisely because Sharifan was Qasim’s daughter. At the moment, however, she became a tool that helped others in violating Qasim’s honour.

After seeing the nakedness of his daughter, Qasim’s focus shifts towards seeking revenge for his lost honour. Through his search for a Hindu household, Qasim highlights the politics of religion. Sharifan’s death is more of a religious defeat since the other was not only able to defile her body but also to kill her and thus succeed in eliminating the chance of her progeny. His search ends when he sees Hindi written outside the house. Seeing Bimla, Qasim rapes and takes the message from one man to another.

While Qasim is busy defiling the Hindu girl with the hopes of avenging his Muslim daughter, Bimla’s father sees her dead, naked corpse and “the first sight of the naked corpse made him tremble; abruptly he shut his eyes tightly. The sword fell from his hand” (63).

Bimla’s death and her father’s similar reaction to that of Qasim depict the cyclical nature of events. The act of shutting their eyes and refusing to see was consistent in Qasim and Bimla’s father at the sight of the bodies of their daughters. By shutting his eyes Qasim depicts his blindness to everything else other than revenge. In doing so, Qasim loses his identity as a father by killing another girl and becomes a rapist while portraying the absurdity

of being a religious fanatic. Through Qasim, Manto highlights the patriarchal association of honour with the female body.

Bimla's father's reaction indicates a similar tendency to unleash madness the way Qasim did so that another girl becomes another victim of revenge. The description used by Manto for Sharifan and Bimla's dead bodies is the same. As soon as Qasim's rage subsides, he sees "the dead body of a young girl – naked, absolutely naked. Fair complexioned, taut and nubile; the small pert breasts were raised towards the ceiling" (63). Seeing the same image again meant Qasim's vengeance did not make a difference. Through the description of Sharifan and Bimla, Manto has merged the two characters in death. In the case of Sharifan and Bimla, the narrative shows the way a patriarchal figure creates a female victim using the backdrop of partition. With their clothing removed, Qasim realizes that neither of the two girls carried any religious marker that would differentiate them from each other while he raped and killed one of them because of her religion.

As opposed to Qasim, Manto presents Sirajuddin, Sakina's father, who desperately looks for his daughter, and once she is found, is overjoyed. At the end of the story, Sakina is found and Sirajuddin sees her in a hospital bed. She seems completely detached from reality and her *apparently* dead body silently lies on the bed.

The doctor looked at the body on the stretcher. He checked its pulse and said to Sirajuddin, 'The window, *open it!*' At the sound of the words, Sakina's corpse moved. Her dead hands undid her *salwar* and lowered it. Old Sirajuddin cried with

happiness, *'She's alive, my daughter's alive!'* The doctor was drenched from head to toe in sweat. (emphasis mine 45).

Despite Sakina's portrayal as a 'body' and a 'corpse' highlighting the metaphorical death of Sakina's sense of self, Sirajuddin's joyful response betrays the traditional patriarchal expectations during partition. Commenting on Sirajuddin's response, Veena Das (2007) explains that during the time of partition patriarchal honour expected women to die rather than "live with bodies that had been violated by other men" (47). Sakina's father, however, gives an unconventional response by "*will[ing] his daughter to live even as parts of her body can do nothing else but proclaim her brutal violation* (emphasis original 47). In doing so, Sirajuddin "transforms the meaning of being a father" (47). For Qasim, a daughter's body was inextricably tied to patriarchal honour, rendering her existence meaningful only in relation to its perceived purity. In contrast, Sirajuddin's response challenges this notion, as he continues to see Sakina as his daughter, even when her violated body – stripped of agency – can do nothing but bear testimony to the trauma she has endured. Unlike women who can narrate their suffering, Sakina's experience is inscribed onto her body, making her violation visible even in the absence of words. This reinforces Veena Das's argument about patriarchal expectations – where women's bodies become battlegrounds for honour and shame.

Sirajuddin's sentence highlighting utter joy stands in stark contrast to the image of abducted and unwanted women. Das explains that comparing Sirajuddin's story

with hundreds of stories in accounts purporting to be based on direct experience in which the archetypical motif is of a girl finding her way to her parents after having

been subjected to rape and plunder and being told, “Why are you here—it would have been better if you were dead” (47).

Whereas in the case of Sirajuddin, we see joy at the knowledge that his daughter is alive and her apparently abused body does not make its way into Sirajuddin’s consciousness. Das’ quotation depicts an expected response given to girls who have been raped and plundered. In *Cracking India*, Lenny’s second ayah named Hamida was kidnapped by Sikhs. Lenny comes to know that Hamida’s family has refused to take her back. Godmother explains that “She was taken away to Amritsar. Once that happens, sometimes, the husband – or his family – won’t take her back ... Some folk feel that way – they can’t stand their women being touched by other men” (184). Compared to this Sirajuddin inverts the notion of patriarchal religious honour and protects his daughter by starting to appreciate her life unlike Bachan Singh’s notion of protection for whom ‘protecting the daughter’ means saving his religious honour. Sarvar V. Sherry Chand in his article “Manto's ‘Open It’: Engendering Partition Narratives” (2006) explains that “the seekers, doers, gazers, knowers – protectors, ‘owners’ as well as violators – are men. Protectiveness and ownership are merely the obverse of the overtly violating, the despoiling side of the patriarchal coin” (310). While we have Bachan Singh, Jeevan, Qasim, and the religiously charged men uploading the view of ‘protecting’ the religion and/or women of their religion. Sirajuddin challenges the patriarchal definition of protection and portrays his preference for having a daughter who is alive.

Manto’s *Open It!* and Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* illustrate how the female body becomes a site of trauma, bearing witness to the violence inflicted upon women during the

Partition, even when language fails to articulate their suffering. In terms of patriarchal violence, the backdrop of partition allowed men to create female victims. One such victim is Sakina. Lying on the hospital bed after being sexually violated, Sakina's condition as a corpse embodies her objectification. The narrative here zooms in on Sirajuddin, the doctor, and Sakina. Each has a different response: while Sirajuddin is overjoyed seeing his daughter alive, the doctor is mortified by Sakina's learned behaviour. However, despite the difference in their responses, the doctor and Sirajuddin depict conscious behaviour. They are aware of their surroundings and their response is in connection to Sakina's movement. Sakina, on the other hand, responds to the spoken words of the doctor. This response depicts her muscle memory linked to the instruction issued. She is unaware of the people around her and her robotic movement explains the trauma she has been subjected to. Highlighting the brutality of Sakina's experience, Sudha Tiwari (2013) in her article quotes Asaduddin saying that "she has become so brutalized and her relationship with language becomes so distorted that henceforth *Khol Do* (open it), carries just one meaning for her to the exclusion of all others" (Asaduddin 54). Das (2007) also highlights Sakina's fractured link with language. Das explains that "a fractured relation to language has been documented for many survivors of prolonged violence, for whom it is the ordinariness of language that divides them from the rest of the world" (46-47). Being so accustomed to the act of letting her trousers down upon hearing the words 'open it', Sakina's body remembers the torment it has been through. This moment depicts the profound sense of loss and deeply engraved trauma that Sakina has been subjected to.

Similar to the display of trauma by Sakina's body, we see Ayah's eyes showing the trauma she has experienced. When Lenny visits Ayah at the end of the novel she describes that Ayah "look[ed] achingly lovely: as when she gazed at Masseur and inwardly glowed" (Sidhwa 220). While this was Lenny's initial observation, she soon realized that something had changed and Ayah's eyes now narrated the trauma her body had been subjected to. Lenny states that "the illusion is dispelled the moment she opens her eyes – not timorously like a bride, but frenziedly, starkly" (220). In case of Sakina and Ayah, the bodies bear witness to the atrocities these women endured.

While Sakina's body initially bears witness to her trauma, the final scene of the story shifts agency to her as she becomes the subject of her own narrative, drawing attention to both the perpetrators of her suffering and the patriarchal structures that enable such violence. Kathryn Andersen and Dana C. Jack (1991) while talking about understanding women's experiences, points to the importance of silent narratives. They comment that "[t]o hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to *listen in stereo*, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them" (emphasis mine 11). Sakina's plight brings to attention the absent figures in the scene responsible for her condition and by extension the patriarchal social structures that permit such violence against women. Being a victim of gang rape, Sakina's living corpse gives a statement about her religious brothers. Sakina was used as a pawn by her perpetrators, and she became a mode of sexual satisfaction for them. Sudha Tiwari (2013) offers further illumination on the bestial desires of men that manifested during partition:

“Manto shows how, during Partition, men pretended to act out of a sense of honour and piety but were reduced to bestiality and violence and at times co-religionists themselves turned out to be the perpetrators of crime” (54). Lying on the hospital bed and responding to the words “Open it!”, Sakina bears witness to her experience and in doing so reclaims some agency. This highlights the fact that even in their marginalization, women like Sakina challenge the patriarchal narratives of partition through their bodies. In cases where women appear silent or dead, it is their dismembered (such as Kusum’s) or raped (Sakina’s) bodies that create the narrative of subversion by attesting to the trauma women experience. Sakina’s presence in the story points to the unsaid and still prevalent violence that women experienced in which patriarchy functioned in its most brute form. Through Sakina, Manto addressed the oppressive nature of patriarchy that fed on women’s vulnerability. Unlike Kusum whose story is narrated by Jeevan and Bachan Singh, Manto presents Sakina as the teller of her own story by allowing a direct gaze at her. Assuming the position of the subject at the end, Sakina overpowers the preceding narrative about “the young volunteers” and their efforts in rescuing people and reveals the true face of patriarchal oppression (Manto 75).

Similarly, Mozelle also attempts to challenge the patriarchal religious narrative of associating religious honour with the female body. In Mozelle’s case, the role of agency is important to consider. This agency emerges from her female body which she utilizes to save a Sikh woman. Mozelle’s act of taking her clothes off to distract the mob indicates the value she associates with human life over religious ideology. Through Mozelle’s action, a shift is observed in the religiously charged mob. Instead of going after Kirpal Kaur’s Sikh

household, they are rendered impotent at the sight of Mozelle's naked body. Commenting about Mozelle, Fahmida Riaz (2012) says that "Mozel in this story is a free spirit, free like the mountain breeze that she enjoys. She is intelligent, far-sighted, decision-maker for her own life, strong of heart and mind and not at all sentimental - far more sensible and practical than most of the men around her" (Riaz). Although in the story Mozelle constantly remains detached from religion, in her description Riaz associates Mozelle with Shakti. Riaz claims that "in Indian parlance, she is Shakti incarnate, as she rises to save two lives. She can clearly see the dreadful hoax religion was turned into in those ghastly days of communal rioting and rejects it in last breath" (Riaz). Riaz's description of Mozelle as "Shakti incarnate" associates god-like qualities with her. In Hindu religions, Shakti represents divine feminine energy that is seen as a powerful creative force. Shakti is also personified in various Hindu goddesses such as *Durga*, *Laxmi*, and *Kali*. These goddesses embody different aspects of Shakti for example some "embody the destructive aspects of shakti, such as death, ... while other goddesses embody the creative and auspicious powers of shakti ... Shakti may be personified as the gentle and benevolent Uma ... or Kali, the terrifying force destroying evil" (Johnson 2019). Mozelle as Shakti incarnate exhibits both destructive as well as creative powers. As a force of destruction, she dismantles the patriarchal religious narrative and as a creator of energy, she gives life to Kirpal Kaur. Through her destructive nature, she creates a mini-narrative that changes Kirpal's dark fate and gives her the opportunity to live with Trilochan. Creating a mini-narrative that prioritizes human life, Mozelle is able to save lives – an action that goes against the norm during partition. When taking lives was the preferable way of

approaching a different religious identity, Mozelle changed the narrative by behaving otherwise.

In terms of creating mini-narratives, Lenny's understanding of the patriarchal world grows with her. At the end of the novel, she understands that Ayah had been let down by men she trusted and that men exploited her for their own desires. Talking to Godmother, Lenny states: "I know Ayah is deeply, irrevocably ashamed. They have shamed her. Not those men in the carts – they were strangers – but Sharbat Khan and Ice-candy-man and Imam Din and Cousin's cook and the butcher and the other men she counted among her friends and admirers" (214). While young Lenny learns this gradually, Mozelle knows the intention of the mob before she even encounters them. This is one of the reasons that she focuses on changing her attire. She knows that the body does not bear a marker of religion.

Through her understanding of the patriarchal association of religion with the female body, Mozelle also achieves a standpoint. In reference to standpoint theory, Sandra Harding (1991) observes that focusing on the experiences of "marginalized peoples ... provides what I call a 'strong objectivity,' a more robust and less biased account of the world" (142). In being an 'outsider within' because of Jewish identity, Mozelle can see the patriarchal manipulation of the religious identities of women. Through the act of taking off her clothes, Mozelle strips away the association of religious honour with the female body and in doing so achieves what Harding refers to as a "strong objectivity" relaying her understanding of the patriarchal system from her unique standpoint. Dorothy Smith (1987) explains that "women's standpoint ... gives us the capacity to see beyond dominant ideology and to understand the

social order's underlying power structures" (107). Seen through her standpoint, Mozelle's actions in dealing with the mob serve as a critique of patriarchal power structure, and in doing so it highlights Smith's idea that women's perspectives expose concealed power structures.

In trying to save Trilochan and Kirpal Kaur, Mozelle runs from the mob towards the stairs and falls "hitting each hard stair and ramming against the iron railing" (176). With blood gushing from her mouth, nose, and ears, her condition seems concerning. Trilochan comes back, takes "off his turban, unwrap[s] it, and cover[s] her naked body . . . Mozelle removed Trilochan's turban. 'Take it away—this religion of yours,' she said, and her arm fell dead across her powerful chest" (177). Mozelle's position as a Jewish woman allows her to develop a standpoint through which she can see two things: firstly, the blind desire to dishonour the *other's* religion. Kirpal Kaur is a target because of her visible religious identity (long hair and her dress) and once Mozelle gives Kirpal her skirt, the mob is unable to identify Kirpal as the religious *other*. Secondly, Mozelle understands the base nature of men. By exposing her naked body, she can divert attention towards her sexuality. Thus, Mozelle manipulated the situation through her understanding of the intersection of religion, gender, and patriarchy. Even though she loses her life in the process, Mozelle's subversion of the patriarchal narrative allows Kirpal Kaur to live. This subversion of the dominant narrative centralizes Mozelle and gives her agency that allows her to challenge patriarchal religious knowledge.

While Mozelle achieves a standpoint along with creating a mini-narrative, in the case of Sakina, Manto achieves a standpoint as the narrator of the story by analyzing and presenting the patriarchal manipulation of religion during partition. Since Manto's writings were notorious for their bold themes, his attention to the plight of women challenged the patriarchal narrative of partition that marginalized women. Alison Wylie in "Why Standpoint Matters" (2003) explains that "standpoint approaches are motivated by a commitment to bring into focus the lives and interests of those who have been overlooked or marginalized in existing social structures" (26). Manto's focus on silent Sakina brings her to the center of the narrative despite her muted presence. Through Sakina, Manto brings into focus the lives of women, who are often overlooked in mainstream and patriarchal narratives of partition. Lubna Akram et al. in the article "Manto's Legendary Contribution to Partition Literature of India" (2019) assert that "to reach the proper meaning of symbolic representation in "*Khol Do*" ["Open It!"] is possible when we understand the voices of the characters and the echoes that exist between the lines" (18). In other words, it is important to go beyond the audible and clear instances of voice to excavate muted and silent perspectives that give insight into women's lives. Manto's restrained language here holds immense value in conveying the agony Sakina was exposed to. The attention towards the 'echoes that exist between the lines' brings Sakina's trauma into focus despite the lack of her voice.

Debates about religion were prominent both before and during the time of partition. The concerns that were religious and which divided people soon subsided once the nations were finally divided. The post-partition time shifted to rehabilitation which involved

returning women and children to their previous families. Manto focuses on this period and specifically on women's experiences. In one of his stories called "By God" (2014) Manto explains, through his protagonist, that the female figure was still seen as a problem caught in the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and partition. Manto writes: "Whenever I thought of these abducted women and girls, all I could see were swollen, distended bellies. What would happen to these bellies? Who is the owner of that which lies stuffed in these bellies – India or Pakistan? And what of the nine months of labour?" (Manto 113). The problem of unwanted pregnancies was widespread, and many families refused to allow women to return to their families because they had been *violated*. This created a crisis of identity. While women were either killed or protected because of their religious identity during partition, the refusal of their families to take these women back added to their challenges as women. This refusal meant breaking familial connections and removing these women from the family structure they belonged to. During partition, religious identity became synonymous with honour in the case of women. Pregnant women were seen as the ones who had lost their honour making them outcasts. Realizing the importance of honour and the association of religious identity with it "several girls, fearful of meeting their parents again, committed suicide on the way [home]. There were some who had succumbed to their tragedies and become weak" (Manto 113). The onus of religious honour before partition and the importance of purity were among some of the challenges women had to face because of their gender. Men, on the other hand, kept their turbans intact and their beards long. Religion became an important aspect in women's lives because of patriarchy and their identities remained in flux because of their

earlier religious affiliations or experiences during partition. Manto expresses the challenged and oppressed position of women when he says,

I always wondered why these women were called ‘runaways’? They weren’t asked to run away. The word ‘runaway’ has a romantic connotation; the man and the woman have an equal role. Running away or eloping, to give it its more romantic name, is like a chasm that causes every nerve and sinew to tingle with excitement before the big leap across. But this is plain and simple abduction where a poor defenseless woman is picked up and locked away in a dark dingy hovel (Manto 113).

The narrative surrounding partition and religion ignores the fact that in abducting a woman, a man is involved, and in raping a woman, a man displays his hatred for the other religion.

While men also had their share of troubles during partition, the atrocities they had to go through did not objectify or mutilate their bodies in the same way as women’s bodies were mutilated. Partition as an event allowed men to sexually assault women while the narrative of religion functioned at the forefront. In some cases, women were harmed to harm the other and in other cases, religion was used as an excuse to fulfill vile desires which could be justified in that political and religious environment.

The fact that patriarchy used religious logic during partition reflects itself in the treatment of women during the division of united India. While an entire nation was divided in the name of religion, people who were committing heinous crimes were acting in ways far removed from the *actual* teachings of their religions. The patriarchal association of religious honour with the female body made partition doubly challenging for women. Religion was all

that the naked eye could see and anything that appeared different was a threat to religion and self. The *other* had to be eliminated. Women suffered the blow because partition placed them in the category of the other marginalizing them on two levels: gender and religion. The intersection of women's gender and their religious identity led to their marginalization by patriarchy. This is the reason that women suffered in both cases: having a religion different than the men of other religions and also having a religion similar to the men at home. The fear of the other religion was inflicted upon women who themselves embodied the *other*. Urvashi Butalia (1998) explains that "some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of 'other' religion, thousands of families were split apart" (Butalia 45). While this was done by men of other religions, women were inflicted with the burden of honour that pushed them towards the same fate by men of their own religion as well. Butalia documents that "hundreds of women had jumped – *or were forced to jump* – into wells because they feared that they would be taken away, raped, abducted, forced to convert to the other religion" (emphasis mine 45). There were incidents of "men of families killing off their women and children . . . Mangal Singh told me how he and his two brothers had taken the decision to kill – he used the word martyr – seventeen members of their family" (46).

This dissertation argues that patriarchy has controlled and marginalized women by manipulating religious notions concerning women (such as honour, chastity, and the sanctity of the female body). This chapter explored this claim with the backdrop of partition and argued that women's bodies became sites of violence which was inflicted and justified by

patriarchy in the name of religion. The analysis of the texts in this chapter reveals that despite women's doubly marginalized status, they were able to create mini-narratives that reflected their experiences and also punctured the patriarchal narrative regarding women's bodies. In cases where the characters are dead or silent, these narratives emerge as a statement of violence against their bodies revealing the hidden truths about the patriarchal structures of control that marginalize women allowing the reader/critic to achieve a standpoint. The puncturing of patriarchal narrative however does not imply a change in circumstances for women but rather the knowledge that patriarchy used women's bodies for its religious honour. We see this in the case of Roop who understands the patriarchally manipulated narrative that recounts Kusum's death but cannot retaliate against it. Roop's deeper dive into the narrative by forcing Bachan Singh to tell his *heroic tale* allows the reader to remember Kusum as a woman: "Roop wants her Papaji to say it, now. Tell this story, just one story of so many. Say what he did" (Baldwin 7813). Through Roop, the silent Kusum becomes important. While Baldwin presents Kusum's death through Jeevan and Bachan Singh, it is Roop who highlights the patriarchal nuances. Roop here becomes an active agent reading patriarchal undertones and educates the reader to look beyond the body. This understanding helps in looking at women not as victims but rather as living symbols of patriarchal violence against their bodies. It explains that "gendered bodies serve not merely as sites or 'grounds' of inscription for violence, as feminist scholars of violence and war have so often observed, but also as living archives that house the memory of violence" (Misri 20).

On the other hand, Sakina, apparently the victim of rape, forces her reader to think about the people responsible for her condition. Through her own memory of her bodily trauma, Sakina shifts the focus to the culprits presenting a statement about the exploitation of religious narrative to save/oppress women. Since Sakina was raped by her coreligionists after partition, she exposes the patriarchal narrative construction of using religion to harm the *other*. Ayah's character also tries to highlight the patriarchal exploitation of the narrative of religion. While Ayah is the one who experiences the trauma, Lenny's narrative presents the mini-narrative highlighting the change in men and portraying their true intentions.

I study the men's faces in the silence that follows. . . Something strange happened then. The whole disorderly mêlée dissolved and consolidated into a single face. The face, amber-eyed, spread before me: hypnotic, reassuring, blotting out the ugly frightening crowd. Ice-candy-man's versatile face transformed into a saviour's in our hour of need (Sidhwa 159).

Lenny's view of Ice-Candy man's transition from a savior to Ayah's abductor is her way of presenting a narrative that runs parallel to the metanarrative of partition. Lenny depicts partition as an event that gave men the license to abduct, rape, mutilate, and kill women.

Through the analysis of the chapters, this section has traced the construction of a female victim such as Sakina, Ayah, Kusum, and Sharifan by the male perpetrators such as Jeevan, Bachan Singh, Ice-Candy man, and Qasim. The analysis in this section, thus, proves that patriarchal oppression created female victims by making women's bodies the markers of religious and patriarchal honour and exploiting the backdrop of partition to possess women.

The splitting of India into two nations of different religions was reflected in women's bodies because of the patriarchal association of honour with the female body. However, despite the apparent marginalized status, women made space for creating alternate narratives that depicted their experiences and in doing so they unmasked patriarchal motives while also puncturing patriarchal narratives that presented women as objects of male honour and victims of gendered violence.

Chapter 2: “All women are victims of deception”: Unveiling Patriarchal Equilibrium

The title of the chapter comes from Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* which highlights Firdaus’s – the protagonist – reading of the patriarchal structures of control in her life. Patriarchy does not always appear as an oppressive force, but often as a benevolent protector or a guiding principle for the family or society – as seen in the previous chapter – that hides and masks patriarchal violence as a religious interpretation. Women are led to believe that fulfilling the roles imposed on them – such as being a wife, mother, or obedient daughter – is their ultimate purpose, and this becomes internalized as truth. This deception is so deeply ingrained that women are often unaware of how they are being manipulated. To “unveil”³ patriarchal equilibrium is to expose the falsehoods that uphold it. It involves recognizing that the roles imposed on women are not empowering but are rooted in systemic control. Women’s awakening comes when they realize that the societal expectations placed on them are not natural or inherent, but rather a construction designed to maintain patriarchal power. In the process of unveiling patriarchal equilibrium, women create a third space and develop mini-narratives. As seen in these texts, women like Firdaus and Nnu Ego begin to understand the deception they’ve been subjected to, but often, they only find liberation through painful or extreme means – whether through rejecting their roles, seeking autonomy, or tragically, death.

³ It is important to note that the act of veiling or unveiling in itself is not necessarily being proposed here as a symbol of falsity or awakening. Rather, the focus is on how these actions can be manipulated by patriarchal systems to maintain or challenge gendered power dynamics.

Nawal El Saadawi's protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus, through her observation of the victimization of women depicts the essence of this chapter. Talking to the reader about her understanding of the world of men, Firdaus says

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows ... That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women (El Saadawi 117-118).

Firdaus' observation underscores that men subjugate and marginalize women by deceiving them. This deception can be seen in the form of illusions created by men to hide the direction of patriarchal control. Patriarchy constructs illusions – either by using religion (as explored in the previous chapter) or by exploiting cultural and religious traditions – in making women believe that their primary role is to submit to patriarchal power. The passage highlights systemic violence by pointing to the paradox of women being penalized for the very roles that are imposed upon them such as their roles in marriage as mothers and wives. Identifying marriage as a system of 'the most cruel suffering', Firdaus highlights the patriarchal exploitation of the institution of marriage that uses women's bodies and labor by burdening them with 'menial services' while retaining patriarchal control through 'blows'. Referring to the cyclical nature of patriarchal deception and control – or patriarchal equilibrium –, Firdaus points to the patriarchal narratives that make women believe that they are 'weak' or 'low', further solidifying the idea of women's marginalization.

While the texts in this chapter come from distinct time periods and different geographical areas, the themes they explore closely align with the central argument of this dissertation: patriarchy functions by creating a female victim while hiding the direction of control and oppression. Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter argues that a female victim is created by a patriarchal figure using periods of transition, either in the personal life of characters or external political times of change, as an excuse. These transitory periods pave the way for patriarchal deception through the manipulation of religious and cultural traditions allowing men to marginalize women. By focusing on the domestic roles of women in *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Woman at Point Zero*, and *Things Fall Apart*, this section argues that similar to the exploitation of religion during partition, patriarchy maintains its equilibrium by exploiting and manipulating traditions (traditional roles of women, cultural, religious traditions) to marginalize and subjugate women in the domestic sphere. While partition can be seen as a time denoting political transition, this chapter focuses on transitions in the lives of female characters that pave the way for patriarchal exploitation, manipulation, and deception. Along with this, the chapter also sheds light on the construction of manhood (*Things Fall Apart*) that sets the stage for the development of patriarchal values leading to situations in which women appear as marginalized figures resulting from the innovation of patriarchal masculinity – understood as a rigid intensification of tradition that Okonkwo perceives as progress toward an ideal masculinity. By zeroing in on the themes of motherhood, marriage, and prostitution, this chapter suggests that patriarchy exploits women’s position in the domestic sphere by either using tradition (religious traditions or

traditional practices) to oppress and confine women or by patriarchally exploiting the cultural and traditional definition of motherhood and marriage to marginalize women.

This chapter also explores the development of mini-narratives by women, which can function in various ways. These narratives may serve as a means of rejecting patriarchal discourse, resulting in the creation of a 'third space' for women, as seen with characters like Adaku and Firdaus. Alternatively, they can reveal a critical understanding of patriarchal methods that marginalize women, such as the experiences of Nnu Ego and Firdaus. Another form of mini-narrative arises through the development of female bonds that challenge male patriarchal constructions, as seen in the relationship between Okonkwo's wife, Ekwefi, and her daughter, Ezinma.

In this chapter, the mini-narratives take a slightly different shape. While each narrative is deeply personal and context-specific, there is a common thread in how these women challenge their prescribed roles. Adaku's narrative, like Firdaus', critiques the imposed limits of womanhood, asserting their agency in a space that has traditionally silenced them. Nnu Ego's narrative, by contrast, shows the pain of reconciling personal desires with societal expectations, presenting a critical reflection on the institutions of motherhood and marriage. Meanwhile, Ekwefi and Ezinma's bond disrupts the gendered hierarchy of Okonkwo's household, revealing the complexity of female solidarity in a patriarchal society. Thus, while there are distinct forms of mini-narratives across the three texts, they all reflect the tension between the individual woman's voice and the larger societal structures that attempt to silence her.

Seen as a system of oppression, patriarchy manifests itself in different forms. While the previous chapter focused on the patriarchal structure with the backdrop of political upheaval, this chapter traces patriarchy within the domestic arrangement. In a familial setting, the role of women appears to be closely connected to children making motherhood and marriage important domains of women's lives within the household. The institutionalization of motherhood and marriage, therefore, presents opportunities for patriarchal control. Biswajit Ghosh in his chapter "The Institution of Motherhood: A Critical Understanding" (2016) while discussing the institution of motherhood comments that "the ideology of motherhood is stereotyped in all most all [ibid] societies and a girl is normally socialized since her birth to take such role after marriage. Motherhood is therefore a patriarchal construction" (19). The patriarchal conditioning of women to prioritize marriage and motherhood can take place through traditions. In most cases, the institutionalization of motherhood and marriage happens through traditional beliefs (either religious or cultural practices). Through these traditions, a patriarchal version of motherhood and marriage is created that places invisible shackles on women. Literary scholar Mariam Irene Tazi-Preve in the article "Unveiling Patriarchal Motherhood" (2020) highlights that "the patriarchal system has developed and propagated an idealized image of what it means to be a mother" setting unrealistic standards that leads to "a mother's life" being "characterized by her constant state of exhaustion" (168). In such cases, it is not merely motherhood (or the act of mothering) that tires women; rather, the patriarchal connotations associated with motherhood demand more from a mother apart from her childbearing and child-rearing role.

While the previous chapter explored a form of patriarchy that was in the public domain (abduction of Ayah and her subsequent removal from the Sethi household, Kusum's dismembering because of the fear of the public 'other', Sakina's rape by the men of her community), this chapter focuses on patriarchal control at a private and intimate level. Sylvia Walby (1990) terms this as private patriarchy explaining that "private patriarchy is based upon household production, with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly in the relative private sphere of the home" (178). In the space of the home, patriarchy is implemented through the father figure or the husband who maintains control over women in their roles as mothers and wives respectively. Along with this, the patriarchal structure is also manifested through the traditional belief system that includes a communal setup and the involvement of extended family structures. Kochurani Abraham in the book *Persisting Patriarchy* (2019) details the need to subvert patriarchal persistence rather than just surviving it. Talking about patriarchy as an evolving structure, Abraham explains that "patriarchy is seen not as having a single form or site, but as encompassing a much wider realm" (54). Abraham further states that in this wider realm, "some see two basic dimensions, 'the rule of the father' and 'the rule of the husband', as intrinsic to patriarchy, encompassing the stratification of social attainment by sex" (54). Although the household patriarchal structure develops through the father or husband, various additional factors add to the successful functioning of patriarchy within the intimate setting. Two of these factors are economic dependency and economic independence. In a patriarchal setup, both these aspects function towards strengthening the patriarchal hold. In the case of economic dependency, the basic patriarchal formula is portrayed: the head that wears the crown reigns supreme (pun

intended). However, in the case of economic independence (a structure that is meant to give some autonomy), women end up being doubly challenged. In a study titled “Patriarchy, Family Structure and the Exploitation of Women's Labor” (1988), Julia A. Heath and David H. Ciscel study “the higher status of men in the labor force” that translates “into the persistence of patriarchal hierarchies within the household” (784). Regarding working women, the authors convey that “as far as providing inputs into the family's production system, not only are working women shouldering more of the responsibility than non-working women, but the burden has become much heavier over time” (788). Moreover, “having a husband present does not alleviate the onus of time expenditures for a working woman. This is what we would expect, given a patriarchal household” (788). In the household, as wives and mothers, women’s roles therefore become doubly challenging because of the burden of patriarchal control. While non-working women depend on the patriarch, working women find themselves in different sets of challenges – all originating from patriarchy.

The role of tradition is central to understanding how patriarchy functions to marginalize and subjugate women. One significant aspect of tradition is the way it carries ideological power, particularly through cultural expressions such as proverbs. Proverbs serve as a key mechanism through which patriarchal values are perpetuated across generations, often disguised as cultural wisdom or natural truths. As Juliet Kamwendo and Hassan O. Kaya in their article “Gender and African Proverbs” (2016) argue, proverbs "are used to articulate the deeply entrenched patriarchal systems of African social and cultural

organization" (92). These proverbs communicate and affirm cultural beliefs, values, and norms, but they also have the effect of reinforcing negative gender stereotypes and the marginalization of women. For example, a Kiswahili proverb, "The woman is like a child," meaning "she must be guided all the time" (Kamwendo & Kaya 95). Similarly, other proverbs like "The woman never thinks beyond the bed she sleeps on" and "A woman and an invalid are the same thing" (95) further institutionalize the idea that women's roles are confined to the domestic sphere, reinforcing their subordinate status. Abreham Alemu in the journal article "Oral Narrative as Ideological Weapon for Subordinating Women" (2007) highlights the deep-rooted cultural construction of patriarchy. Referring to the Jimma area, Alemu comments that in connection to the birth of a girl, "the saying goes, Taa 'uu mannaa durba dhalchuu wayya 'Fathering a daughter is better than sitting idle'. This proverb not only externalizes the low value the patriarchy attaches to the female sex but also propagates its ideology: 'Women are naturally inferior to men'" (58). These patriarchally inclined proverbs propagate the subordination of women. Another proverb relating to the "cruelty of women" is that "Sareen flra namaati, nadheen dina isaa 'Dog is the best friend of man, woman his cruellest enemy'. The same view is expressed in the proverb Garaajabina akka haadhakee, jagnummaa akka abbaa kee 'Be cruel as your mother, and brave as your father'" (71). As a result, the association of patriarchy with tradition would create a sense of marginalization for women along with their internalization of lack of agency and self-worth.

This ideological function of proverbs becomes even more significant when we consider their relationship with tradition itself. Tradition, as Yaacov Yadgar notes in the

article “Tradition” (2013), is a "dynamic meta-structure" that shapes an individual's sense of the world and her selfhood. In other words, tradition is not just about static customs but is deeply tied to identity and agency, forming the foundation of how individuals understand their place in the world (455-56). Yadgar’s analysis of tradition provides a lens through which we can understand how patriarchal ideas are passed down through generations, not only via institutionalized practices but also through oral culture, including proverbs. These proverbs are presented as an integral part of cultural heritage and collective wisdom, thereby normalizing patriarchal values and presenting them as unchangeable or essential to the culture.

The patriarchal impact of tradition is further highlighted by scholars like Hannelie J. Wood (2019), who examines how traditional gender practices, particularly within religious contexts, harm women’s health, limit their rights, and entrench harmful stereotypes about masculinity and femininity. The cultural acceptance of these practices makes it difficult for women to challenge the power structures that constrain them. In the same vein, Aloysius M. Lugira (2009) discusses how African traditional religions and oral cultures, which have long been passed down through generations “by word of mouth”, carry the weight of societal beliefs and rules that often marginalize women (16). These traditional beliefs, framed as cultural truths, become deeply entrenched and difficult to dislodge.

Thus, proverbs and traditional sayings become ideological tools that perpetuate the subordination of women while simultaneously being presented as foundational elements of culture. This coupling of patriarchy with tradition creates a constrictive space for women,

reinforcing their marginalization and limiting their agency. The intersection of patriarchal control with traditional practices often disguises oppression as culture, making it harder for women to recognize and resist. This process of embedding patriarchal values in tradition further entrenches the limitations placed on women, pushing them to the periphery of society and suppressing their voices.

The ideological role of proverbs in perpetuating patriarchal values highlights how tradition becomes a tool for marginalizing women, presenting oppressive practices as cultural or natural. This coupling of patriarchy with tradition is not only a function of oral culture but also extends to religious practices, which play a significant role in shaping gender dynamics. Hannelie J. Wood (2019) explains that “in a patriarchal context, religious arguments that manifest into harmful traditional and cultural practices are used to support injustice towards women” (5). Addressing the church’s confused and ambiguous approach toward male and female spirituality, Wood comments that “the structures of cultural patriarchy supported by the leaders of the church, whether directly or indirectly, are one of the principal reasons why women still suffer violence, inequality and subordination” (5). The involvement of the patriarchal in the religious happens through the manipulation of religious traditions that favor men while placing unnecessary constraints on women. The result is the modification of religion through traditions that marginalize women. Kumkum Sangari in the article “Politics of Diversity” (1995) “critiques the enmeshing of religious community with personal laws as a form of new orientalism that is both patriarchal and ideologically laden” (3287). Arguing about the role of Indian state in supporting patriarchal interests through religion, Sangari

explains that the state has encouraged patriarchal interests “on religious grounds” (3295). Sangari states that throughout history religion has been used as a defense for patriarchal structures and control over women’s sexuality. Community leaders and spokesmen have portrayed patriarchal practices as religious in nature. This is evidenced by “the debates surrounding the Special Marriages Act, the Hindu Code Bill, and the Uniform Civil Code” (3295). The Indian state shares the ideology that supports “the coding of patriarchy as religion by community spokesmen” and in doing so it places religion above caste, class, and regional practices when formulating family laws (3295). Sangari explains that “as personal laws curtail women's rights they define and defend male privileges: only the institution of women's rights can dismantle them” (3295). By highlighting the influence of patriarchy on religious traditions, Sangari exposes the main objective: the defining and defending of male privileges. Through religion male authority is sanctified and its implementation at the state level shows the multiple layers through which patriarchal control is imposed on women. Highlighting the male-centered approach in religious cultures, Elisabetta Ruspini in *Women and Religion* (2019), explains that because of patriarchal tendencies in societies where religions surfaced, female scholars experienced the problem of “androcentrism on all religious cultures” (1). Ruspini asserts that androcentrism emerges from complete patriarchal control “on cultural leadership and on the transmission of culture: androcentric scholarship proceeds as if women do not exist, or as if they are passive actors, objects rather than subjects, and the voice of women is rarely heard” (1). As a result, religion becomes polluted with patriarchal viewpoints since patriarchal societies take preexisting traditions and

religions and manipulate them to oppress women formulating religions and traditions that are patriarchally inclined.

The analysis in this section begins with *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi which examines the intersection of religious traditions and their patriarchal manipulation while arguing that men use religion as a means of furthering their control of women by either ignoring those facets of religion that protect women's rights or by exploiting religious traditions to benefit themselves while marginalizing women. The analysis will also look for the construction of mini-narratives by female characters that either liberate them from patriarchal shackles or allow them to develop a third space by negotiating with patriarchal forms of control. The second novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta focuses on the institution of motherhood to analyze the way it is exploited by patriarchy setting unrealistic standards for mothers. Sandwiched between Igbo tradition and Lagos' urbanized setting, the protagonist finds herself crushed by the patriarchal burdens of both worlds. The novel also depicts deviation from patriarchal norms through one of its female characters: Adaku. However, this comes at the cost of leaving the world known to her while navigating a new life. The third text, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, shifts the focus towards the male protagonist. The analysis in this section highlights Okonkwo's patriarchal construction and definition of manhood. The analysis shows the relative absence or marginal presence of female characters in the novel, especially in comparison to Okonkwo. This section suggests that by centralizing Okonkwo's narrative, the novel presents him as the Ibo man while there is no counterpart present. By examining Okonkwo's definition of manhood, the section

highlights not only the absence of female characters from his narrative but also male characters who fail to live up to Okonkwo's standards of manhood. These texts provide a foundation for analyzing the patriarchal manipulation of traditional values and traditional roles of women to marginalize women in patriarchal societies. These texts offer a cross-cultural analysis of the way patriarchy adapts to changing cultural norms devising and manipulating these norms to push women to the periphery.

Woman at Point Zero (1977) by Nawal El Saadawi

This section will examine the intersection of patriarchy and religious traditions in the lives of women that results in furthering their marginalization and exploiting their sexuality. This section argues that patriarchy deceives women by exploiting religious traditions in a way that benefits men and marginalizes women. In this process of patriarchal deception, a female victim is created by a male member who uses his position as a protector to exploit and marginalize the female figure. This idea will be explored through the themes of female sexuality and the institution of marriage versus prostitution. This section also suggests that prostitution emerges as a way of challenging patriarchal norms, that objectify and exploit women's bodies while creating a standpoint for Firdaus that allows her to see beyond patriarchal deception.

Nawal El Saadawi was an Egyptian writer and physician famous for being vocal about women in Islam. Highlighting the link between women's oppression through capitalism and the politics of religion in an interview (2014), El Saadawi says that "the root of the oppression of women lies in the global post-modern capitalist system, which is

supported by religious fundamentalism” (Fariborz). El Saadawi’s statement suggests that women’s oppression has its roots in the way the global world works. The ‘post-modern capitalist system’ according to El Saadawi mimics the patriarchal structure through the dynamics of control and hierarchy. This patriarchal structure is then rooted in religious discourse to create a system of oppression for women. The involvement of religion is important “because they [patriarchal class society] need a god to justify oppression” (Fariborz). This holds in cases where societies are patriarchally inclined, and the intersection of men’s authority with religious traditions creates a constricting and marginalizing environment for women. Patriarchy, therefore, does not function on its own. It creates a system of oppression by intersecting with other narratives (such as capitalism and religious fundamentalism) to create structures of control that place women at the periphery. Commenting on the intersection of Islam and patriarchy, Beatrice Pistola in an online article “Intersections of Islamism and Patriarchy in Woman at Point Zero” (2023) published in the *Middle East and North African Review* comments that “Nawal El Saadawi, a revolutionist since birth, was highly critical of the corruption of religious systems and the role they played in the oppression of women. Rather than being critical of Islam itself, she was concerned with the institutions built around it” (Pistola). This institutionalization of religion is what makes space for oppression and violence against women where the patriarchal exploitation of religious traditions creates ways for controlling women.

After being removed from her position as the Director of Health Education after the publication of her controversial text *Women and Sex*, Saadawi diverted her attention towards

studying neurosis in Egyptian women. During her research, El Saadawi was told about the inmates in Qanatir prison among whom a woman captivated El Saadawi's attention. Her novel *Woman at Point Zero* is based on El Saadawi's meeting with a female prisoner in Qanatir prison who was charged with murder on account of killing a man. Firdaus, the protagonist of the novel, was accused of murder and now awaits execution. Throughout her stay at the Qanatir prison, Firdaus has refused to see people and rejected all efforts to avert her impending death. Finally agreeing to see El Saadawi, Firdaus' narrative walks us through different periods of her life that converge within the prison walls as she waits for her execution.

Seen isolated from her crime, Firdaus was an epitome of gentleness. Describing Firdaus, El Saadawi writes that "if you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder" (4). Firdaus' life begins at home with her strict father and silent mother. At her home, roles were starkly defined for men and women highlighting the superiority of men and subordination of women. Male children were a priority and females were merely needed for household tasks. Firdaus developed this understanding through her parents' marital structure. Literary scholar Nausheen Ishaque in her article "Reclaiming the Female Body in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*" (2020) talks about the link of patriarchal values to familial structure suggests that "the family order, as depicted by El Saadawi, is a testimony to how patriarchy is part and parcel of the family framework in Egyptian society" (635). Firdaus' father was the embodiment of patriarchy and the female figures around him (his wife and daughter) resided at the margins.

Zuhur Sherifa in the article “Women and Empowerment in the Arab World” (2003) presents a similar notion while expressing that “the Arab states embody various patriarchal structures and Arab society clings to a patriarchal system in which women’s position within and duties towards the family precede their rights as individuals” (17). Firdaus’ mother was her father’s personal servant. Her role was to keep the man’s belly full and his body comfortable. The mother remained a silent figure, and her individuality was overshadowed by her role as a wife. Remembering her mother’s service to her father, Firdaus recalls

Our hut was cold, yet in winter my father used to shift my straw mat and my pillow to the small room facing north and occupy my corner in the oven room. And instead of staying by my side to keep me warm, my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm. In summer I would see her sitting at his feet with a tin mug in her hand as she washed his legs with cold water (El Saadawi 16).

In Firdaus’ memory, her mother always appears to serve her father, performing her role as his wife. This conveys a message to Firdaus about her own self as a woman. Analyzing the male-female dichotomy in the novel *Benon Tugume* in the article “Interrogating the Male-Female Gender Dichotomy in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*” (2021) explains that Firdaus learns “that men have vast power and women do not have any power which limits and diminishes their say in the family. She too realizes that boys are more valued than girls” (122). This familial structure portrays patriarchy’s reign in the lives of women. Since Firdaus’s father was the first man she encountered in her life, he became the epitome of patriarchal oppression. Talking to El Saadawi, Firdaus says that “when one of his female

children dies, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night” (23). However, the situation is different “when the child that dies was a boy” (23). In such cases, Firdaus explains that “he [her father] would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep. My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened” (El Saadawi 23). During this time of her life, Firdaus learned of her insignificance as a girl that prepares her to be a female victim in a man’s world, a lesson that she would carry with her in fulfilling her role as a wife. Coupled with this understanding of her inferiority was the exploitation of religious traditions that served patriarchal purposes.

While women like Firdaus were marginalized through a patriarchal structure, it was also patriarchy’s intersection with religious traditions that added to the marginalization women experienced. Highlighting patriarchy’s attempt to deceive women by twisting religion, Nausheen Ishaque (2020) explains that the novel portrays the way “women’s lives are rigorously controlled by the norms of fidelity, subservience, and religion. Religion has been twisted in favor of men thus establishing their supremacy and giving them license to ill-treat women” (638). As a result, allegedly religious men, like Firdaus’ father, commit violent acts that defy the norms of their religions. Firdaus highlights this hypocrisy when she says that

Despite his outbursts of anger, Firdaus’ father was a religious man. Every Friday morning he would put on a clean *galabeya* and head for the mosque to attend the weekly prayer. The prayer over, I would see him walking with the other men like

himself as they commented on the Friday sermon, For was it not verily true that stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honour of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin...? (El Saadawi 15).

Through her father's actions, Firdaus saw a duality in his behaviour: his treatment of Firdaus' mother and his agreement with the imam's sermon. Her father embodied the predicament that Firdaus would endure throughout her life: patriarchy and its exploitation and complete ignorance of religious traditions. Exploitation here refers to those traditions that are modified to serve patriarchal purposes whereas ignorance denotes deliberate misinterpretation and misunderstanding of those values that preach the idea of humanness (encompassing women within the domain of human). Saddik Gohar in his article "Empowering the Subaltern in *Woman at Point Zero*" (2016) talks about the way El Saadawi challenges the patriarchal society in the novel. Gohar highlights that "the façade of religiosity and piety epitomized by Friday sermons and ritualistic worship conceals a corrupt and immoral male-dominated society" (178). Gohar explains this through Firdaus' narration when she tells her story to El Saadawi from jail. Firdaus tells the author "that her father is a thief who like other men in the village is 'quicker than his neighbor in stealing from the fields once the crop was ripe.'" (178). Recalling another instance Firdaus says that her father knows "how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry" (El Saadawi 10). Gohar's statement highlights the difference between the exploitation of religious traditions and their ignorance. I concur with Gohar and argue that Firdaus' father

ignored the religious instruction of stealing to get crops whereas he *exploited* the religious tradition of marriage to get dowry. Referring to the manipulation (in terms of exploitation and ignorance) of religious discourse Luma Balaa in her literary article “El Saadawi Does Not Orientalize the Other in Woman at Point Zero” (2013) comments that “the use of Islamic discourse is so effective in manipulating the masses because it combines religion and traditions; power structures and patriarchy take advantage of this melange in order to oppress women” (190). Through this statement, Balaa rightly points out the aspect of oppression that results from the exploitation of religion allowing men to create a female victim.

It was religion that taught men not to beat other human beings, yet wives were beaten. It was religion that warned against discrimination between genders, yet male children were prized, and female babies were wished dead. Firdaus’ father was not the only person with whom she associated this discrepancy between the practices and teachings of Islam. For her, every man emerging from the mosque resembled her father. She tells El Saadawi that she “knew nothing about men. But [she] could hear them as they invoked Allah’s name and called upon His blessings, or repeated His holy words in a subdued guttural tone” (16). She sees the resemblance between men in their display of religion and pioussness. She says: “Sometimes I could not distinguish which one of them was my father. He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell” (16). This resemblance between Firdaus’ father and other men who emerged from the mosque was the first lesson for Firdaus about men. Since her father was the male figure at home, he became Firdaus’ point of reference for understanding men and hence the resemblance she observed between these holy men alluded to the

discrepancy between the religious teachings they preached and accepted, and the practices that women like Firdaus were subjected to. Similar to Roop and Kusum's upbringing in *What the Body Remembers*, Firdaus' early years teach her about her subordinate position as a woman and train her to submit to patriarchal authority.

The impact of patriarchy and its exploitation of religious traditions manifested itself in various forms for Firdaus. While her family structure conveyed the idea of her subordination to male members and laid the groundwork for her victimization, the mutilation of her body deepened the impact. Her mother "brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs" (El Saadawi 16). Before this, Firdaus was familiarized with the sense of sexual pleasure through Mohammadain, her friend in the fields. After the mutilation, Firdaus realized that she could not feel that sensation anymore. Much of the scholarship on *Woman at Point Zero* points to Firdaus' clitoridectomy as a central reference point in the book's critique of patriarchy. Benon Tugume (2021) points out that "genital mutilation denies her sexual satisfaction and becomes a mark of Firdaus' female identity . . . It conditions her to bow down to the patriarchal system that subjects women to humiliation and enslavement" (121-22). In many African countries, female genital mutilation is observed as a cultural and religious practice. Despite being a traditional practice and an innovation in the case of Islam, the practice is justified through religion due to which women adhere to it despite the fear of death. FGM represents the manipulation of religious traditions intending to control women.

Building on the manipulation of tradition through practices like FGM, Mary Nyagweso Wangila's analysis of clitoridectomy in Kenya highlights how religious beliefs, alongside cultural norms, sustain this harmful practice, making it an unquestionable tradition for many women. Mary Nyagweso Wangila in her book *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya* (2015) discusses the prevalence of clitoridectomy in Kenya and the influence of religion in observing this practice as a religious law. Wangila's detailed analysis of clitoridectomy results from interviewing fifty women who share their stance regarding the practice based on their religious views. Through her exploration, Wangila observes that despite the diversity of religions, the insistence on observing the practice does not change. Surprisingly, "of the 50 women interviewed, 90 percent cited religion (Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous beliefs) as one of the reasons for performing female circumcision" (15). Other reasons for the sustenance of this practice are traditional. Wangila explains that in "African communities, *tradition* describes the various elements that legitimate the social structure and that culture is rarely distinguished from religion" (100). A practice coupled with religious justification becomes an unquestionable law that women observe despite the challenges associated with it. Wangila writes that upon asking about the reasons for circumcision a twenty-six-year-old woman responds "I agreed to be circumcised because my mother told me that it would make me into a clean, attractive woman who can give her husband beautiful children" (103). Another woman states that "uncircumcised women smell and their children may die from the curse of ancestors for disobeying tradition" (103).

Through the practice of female circumcision, tradition and religion merge and the deviation from either is seen as a betrayal of both. Firdaus' interaction with religion thus begins through the sacrifice of pleasure by having a piece of herself removed. She neither questions the practice nor tries to resist, for being the daughter of a religious man and knowing her place as a girl, Firdaus knows when to submit. Firdaus' submission here resembles Roop and Kusum's understanding of being good Sikh girls. For Roop and Kusum, being good Sikh girls meant submitting to patriarchal structures and laws that require sacrifice. Firdaus is also required to sacrifice her bodily pleasure since patriarchal law demands ultimate submission from her. Resistance, therefore, was not an option, for Firdaus also believed her subordinate status like Roop and Kusum understood their marginalized position compared to Jeevan. The realization of the loss of sexual pleasure becomes apparent when Firdaus is unable to experience the "sensation of sharp pleasure" she was so familiar with before (El Saadawi 17). Firdaus recalls that during one of his visits, her uncle "was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body" (18). As her life progresses, her struggles start revolving around the mutilated part of her body as the noose of patriarchal religious traditions tightens.

Although clitoridectomy alters a woman's body, the objective is to preserve the female body for her male counterpart. Nawal El Saadawi (2015) talks about the exploitative nature of clitoridectomy when it comes to the female body. El Saadawi explains that "in Egypt it is only the clitoris which is amputated, and usually not completely" (22). However,

in Sudan clitoridectomy is a complete operation that involves “the complete removal of all the external genital organs. They cut off the clitoris, the two major outer lips (labia majora) and the two minor inner lips (labia minora). Then the wound is repaired” (22). El Saadawi highlights that the practice is rooted in a patriarchal structure of control and this is evidenced by the constant adjustment of the vaginal opening. The outer opening of the vagina is narrowed with stitches and “on the marriage night it is necessary to widen the external opening by slitting one or both ends with a sharp scalpel or razor so that the male organ can be introduced” (22). In case of divorce “the external opening is narrowed once more to ensure that she cannot have sexual relations. If she remarries, widening is done again” (22). The adjustment of the female body with respect to her marital status makes FGM a service to patriarchy. Fedwa Malti-Douglas in her book *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (1995) attempts to place El Saadawi within the cultural and historical context of the writer and suggests that El Saadawi’s texts cannot be analyzed by detaching them from the Islamic and Arabic culture. Talking about *Woman at Point Zero*, Malti-Douglas argues that “[t]he body in the Saadawian literary corpus is more than a source of conflict. It is intimately tied to a discourse of gender and sexual definition” (3). In connection to the female body, Malti-Douglas raises the following questions: “[W]hat is sexual slavery if not the exploitation of woman’s body? Indeed, one of the most important leitmotifs of *Woman at Point Zero* is woman’s body. Who owns it? Who controls it? Does Firdaus have a right to it?” (52). Up until now, Firdaus’ body is controlled by others. Her body, being an object, is tailored to suit patriarchal purposes similar to Ayah’s body. In the case of Ayah, her body becomes a means of earning for Ice-Candy man. He uses her body for

prostitution mutilating her sense of self-worth. On the other hand, Firdaus' body serves patriarchy through FGM. While prostitution was the ultimate form of patriarchal oppression and exploitation that was inflicted on Ayah, Firdaus merely began experiencing patriarchal control through mutilation.

The implication of patriarchal exploitation of religious traditions is also manifested through the institution of marriage that turns Firdaus into a victim of patriarchal oppression. While in her early years, her father and other men resembling him represented patriarchy and its exploitation of religious traditions for her, in case of marriage, her uncle becomes the patriarchal figure. Through her father, Firdaus merely learned the ways of men. Her relationship with her father trained Firdaus to be an inferior being but it did not turn Firdaus into a victim since her mother held that position. However, her uncle serves as the patriarchal figure that victimizes Firdaus using her marriage and religion for his benefit. Much like her prior encounter with patriarchy, the institution of marriage also leaves Firdaus without a choice. Firdaus' religious uncle, faced with the predicament of looking after her, decides to marry her off to a sixty-year-old man. She is represented as an inferior degenerate against her religious uncle who needs to fulfill his duty by ensuring that she is married. Firdaus' uncle was an educated man pursuing his studies in Cairo but does not agree to send Firdaus to a university: "To the university? To a place where she will be sitting side by side with men? A *respected Sheikh and man of religion like myself* sending his niece off to mix in the company of men?" (emphasis mine 47). The uncle's statement adds another layer to the intersection of patriarchy and religion in the case of women: the lack of education justified through religion

in a patriarchal setup. Research scholars Nurul Huda et al. in their article titled “Women’s Access to Education: A Patriarchal Culture Creates Gender Equality in Nawal El-Saadawi *Woman at Point Zero*” (2023), connect Firdaus’ marginalization and subordination to the lack of education. Huda et al. comment that the novel presents patriarchy functioning through hindering and blocking women’s way to education. This, in turn, not only pushes Firdaus to the periphery but also limits her chances of attaining self-worth. The authors suggest that the novel presents us with “a patriarchal society built on hierarchical divisions based on gender, social status and class. Saadawi focuses on the dynamics of unequal power relations and finds that systems of dominance and subordination are both structural and discursively constituted” (185). While Huda et al. are right in highlighting the lack of access to education as a factor that contributes to Firdaus’ marginalization, I contend that all men in Firdaus’ life used different methods to implement control while hiding it under the façade of religion. Since Firdaus’ uncle was an educated man of religion, he justified his stance of keeping Firdaus away from university through religion.

Religion is manipulated as an excuse to justify patriarchal control creating a pattern of patriarchal deception, allowing men to disguise their abuse as protective authority and demand unquestioning obedience under the guise of religious duty. Firdaus learns that the intersection of religion and patriarchy allows men to be abusive, but these same men can miraculously assume the personality of a protector if other men are involved, and since they are men of religion, what they say must be true which means they must also be obeyed. The uncle’s conversation with his wife regarding Firdaus’ marriage highlights his patriarchal

control over Firdaus. This form of patriarchal control uses religion as an excuse to exercise its control. While discussing Firdaus' dowry, he comments,

If he [Firdaus' future husband] pays a hundred pounds, then Allah will indeed have been generous to us, and I would not be so greedy to ask for more . . . If he accepts to pay one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debts and buy some underwear, as well as a dress or two for Firdaus . . .

Verily, we are full of gratitude to Allah for everything He has bestowed on us. May He be forever praised and exalted (El Saadawi 49).

Firdaus' uncle's decision to arrange her marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud is presented as an instance when a man furthers his agenda by using Islam to justify his decision. Dowry in Islamic context refers to the property or money the groom gives to the bride for her financial security. His invocations and constant thanks to Allah are his way of masking his true self under the façade of fulfilling his religious obligations. The uncle's focus on getting his personal belongings from the money he receives for Firdaus' dowry depicts his hypocrisy and the exploitation of religious tradition to his advantage. Luma Balaa (2018) explains "that the text is set against an Islamic background but it is the abuse, or misinterpretation, of religion, hypocrisy, and the confusion between religion, traditions, and culture that oppress women" (243). Firdaus' uncle's decision not only marginalizes Firdaus but also exposes the way religion is used by seemingly religious men in controlling women's bodies. Gohar (2016) explains that "the plight of the protagonist emphasizes that sexual commodification is augmented by tradition and a corrupt religious system that deliberately confines women in

the periphery of society (175). From abusing her as a child to marrying her off for personal gains, Firdaus' uncle remains the authoritative figure who plays his role in creating Firdaus – the diminutive and weak victim. This aspect of control over the weaker gender alludes to the religious teachings of men being the protectors of women. The preference for *some underwear* over Firdaus' needs highlights the extent to which Firdaus' needs are understood as insignificant and reveals the hypocrisy of her uncle as a religious man. The dowry that is meant for Firdaus is kept for his personal use and the man chosen for Firdaus' nuptials is three times her age. While Firdaus' uncle acts as a man of religion to serve himself by arranging Firdaus' marriage unjustly, Bachan Singh (Kusum's father-in-law) acts as a man of religion to protect his religion by killing Kusum. In both cases, patriarchal ideology operates as a male-constructed logic designed to create a female victim.

In Firdaus' case, although her uncle is familiar with the laws of the religion, he arranges her marriage to a man without her consent. Using his position as Firdaus' guardian and protector, Firdaus' uncle exploits religion in marrying Firdaus without her consent. Firdaus' othering as a Muslim woman is based on the interpretation of Quranic texts that discuss the role of male guardians. Ziba Mir Husseini in her book *Men in Charge?* (2014) talks about the concept of men as protectors and explains that “at the heart of the unequal construction of gender rights in Muslim legal tradition is the idea that God has given men authority over women” (37). This concept has penetrated basic understanding regarding gender roles in Islam. Mir Husseini comments that “defenders of male authority frequently invoke, as their main textual justification, Quranic verse 4:34, from which classical jurists

derived the concept of *qiwamah*, developing it into a guiding principle to define and regulate gender relations” (38). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus’ oppressive protector, her uncle, now transfers her body to her next protector, Sheikh Mahmoud. Firdaus reflects on how oblivious she was to this transition from girl to wife: “I do not know how I put up with my life in my uncle’s house, nor do I remember how I became Sheikh Mahmoud’s wife” (56). With a new authoritarian figure in her life, Firdaus’s marginalization now results from her downgraded role as a wife. During her years with Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus learns “that marriage was a system built on the most cruel suffering for women” (El Saadawi 118). Her life resembles that of her mother as her father’s wife. Beatings become a norm and Firdaus’ body becomes a commodity for Sheikh Mahmoud – another religious figure in Firdaus’ life.

On one occasion he [Sheikh Mahmoud] hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that *all husbands beat their wives*, and my uncle’s wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was *precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives*. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience (emphasis mine 58-59).

It is interesting to note here that despite the patriarchal teachings regarding religious traditions that conveyed women’s insignificance, Firdaus knew Islam does not permit assault.

The confidence in her belief is depicted when she highlights the apparent link between her *respected* uncle, who has read the Quran, and religious laws that forbid such aggressive behaviour. As a wife, this further enhances Firdaus' understanding of men's hypocrisy in terms of religious traditions and their exploitation in marginalizing women. For Firdaus, this exploitation of religion leaves her beaten, swollen, and bruised by her husband, dictating her to remain a part of the cruel world she left to find refuge at her uncle's. Similar to Firdaus, Sakina – Sirajuddin's daughter – also experiences sexual abuse by her religious brothers that leaves her resembling a corpse in the hospital bed. In case of both Sakina and Firdaus, religion is used as a shield to hide patriarchal oppression. For Firdaus, patriarchal control and oppression are masked behind the institution of marriage, and for Sakina, patriarchal abuse is hidden by the youth's portrayal of providing help. Eustace Palmer in the literary article "Nawal El Saadawi and the Female Predicament: A Study of Woman at Point Zero" (2013) while discussing patriarchy, religion, and obedience comments that "El Saadawi presents a view of men all aspects of whose lives seem to be dominated by religion and who might even be sincere in their religious beliefs, but who cannot see the disconnection between this religious devotion and their treatment of their females" (91). Such men might also use "this religious belief as justification for the subjugation of their wives, for the religion also stresses obedience was a duty" (91). While obedience is associated with religion, the patriarchal exploitation of religious traditions corrupts the very religion that women are expected to obey. During her marriage, Firdaus was a constant victim of marital rape. Her husband used and abused her, and Firdaus was trapped by patriarchy and its placement of Firdaus in an oppressive marriage. Telling El Saadawi of her time with Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus says

He leapt on me like a mad dog. The hole in his swelling was oozing drops of foul-smelling pus. I did not turn my face or my nose away this time. I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively, without any resistance, without a movement, as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood or old neglected furniture left to stand where it is, or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair (El Saadawi 60).

Firdaus' description of herself here depicts the embodied patriarchal control. In 'surrendering' herself to Sheikh Mahmoud 'passively', Firdaus highlights the way patriarchy expects women to behave. Firdaus' surrender at this moment also results from her uncle's refusal to keep her despite her bruised body. Her display of obedience remains dominant since it is a lesson that has been taught by patriarchy and she resides within its oppressive hold. Beatrice Pistola (2023) explains that "the novel aims to show that all men are equally implicated in the [patriarchal] framework . . . This framework is entirely created by men, who, being in positions of power, are given the right to trap women into a system that automatically subjugates them to men" (Pistola). It is one of the reasons that Firdaus, up until now, was never able to remove herself from a subjugated position. Being dependent on men (financially and religiously) she remained a commodity that could be used and exploited thus ensuring her constant subjugation.

The final stage in Firdaus' life brings her transition from Sheikh Mahmoud's wife to a prostitute. The patriarchal figures in Firdaus' life make Firdaus an oppressed victim and becoming a prostitute is Firdaus' response to that oppression. This is evidenced in the novel

when Firdaus comments that “right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute” (135). This transition also marks the development of a standpoint and her rejection of patriarchal forms of control. By becoming a prostitute, Firdaus also dismantles her patriarchally constructed identity as a victim. Firdaus realizes the exploitative nature of patriarchy and takes on a profession that would allow her to have control over her life while being a part of the same patriarchal system. Caresse A. John in the literary article “Strategic Ambivalence: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Reading of Nella Larsen’s Novels” (2011) explains that standpoint is “achieved by intellectual reflection on and political engagement with one's own position in society in relation to others' positions” (96). In Firdaus’ case the “standpoint is an understanding of [her] individual location in the social order as part of and shaped by that order's social and political contexts” (John 96). Firdaus learns that her life is shaped by patriarchal norms of control and subjugation. By becoming a prostitute, she uses patriarchy to her advantage. Firdaus understands that through her profession she is still dependent on men, but her encounter with men would be on her terms. In this new setting, Firdaus becomes the decision-maker of her own life.

Not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession was invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife.

All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. *Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife* (emphasis mine 124).

As a prostitute, Firdaus became – as Brooke Lenz (2004) explained in the article “Postcolonial Fiction and the Outsider Within” – the “outsider within” the patriarchal system (Lenz 99). Her transition from a marginalized woman to a prostitute was a step up for Firdaus. Lenz highlights that “marginalized groups of people have less interest in preserving the status quo and occupy a unique position from which to view the culture from which they are marginalized” (98). From her standpoint, Firdaus was able to view all by being involved in the world of men on her terms. She realized that in a patriarchal society, “a man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself. No one can stand this double rejection” (El Saadawi 121). She also understands the importance of money. After rejecting a government official multiple times, Firdaus is put in prison. She hires a lawyer and the court declares her “an honourable woman” (103-104). She learns “that honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one’s honour. An infernal circle whirling round and round, dragging [her] up and down with it” (123-24). It is interesting to note here that while Firdaus experienced all this, it is the older Firdaus in the prison who defines these incidents as learning experiences. For the young Firdaus, these episodes were life itself and she maneuvered her way as she went. So, while the young Firdaus achieves a standpoint as she becomes a prostitute, the narrator Firdaus retains that standpoint through the learnings she shares with El Saadawi and the author conveys it to the reader as a tale of resistance.

Highlighting a similar idea literary scholar Ben-Fred Ohia in the article “Ambivalence of Female Power and Prostitution in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*” (2024) comments that “Saadawi’s retelling of the story of Firdaus allows the latter’s voice to be heard even after her death and Firdaus’ recounting of her own experiences in turn gives Saadawi the power and voice to critique the political, social, and economic ideo[sic] of the Egyptian society” (18). Firdaus’s prostitution therefore plays a dual role: it liberates her from the oppressive hold of patriarchy while helping her achieve a standpoint and allows her to expose the loopholes in patriarchal religious teachings that marginalize women.

Apart from achieving a standpoint, prostitution also gives Firdaus agency and voice. During her time as a prostitute, Firdaus never thinks of her religious uncle, the obedience that patriarchally manipulated religion demands, or her insignificance as a woman. As she becomes familiar with her new life, she discovers herself as a woman, something she was denied all her life. It is only as a prostitute that Firdaus gets the space to discover herself and explore her body.

I discovered that I had black eyes, with a sparkle that attracted other eyes like magnet, and that my nose was neither big, nor rounded, but full and smooth with a fullness of strong passion which could turn to lust. My body was slender, my thighs tense, alive with muscle, ready at any moment to grow even more taut (El Saadawi 73).

This self-realization results in a break from believing in patriarchal lessons while entering an entirely different realm. With this, Firdaus assumes her place at the centre and becomes an active participant in her own life. As a prostitute, Firdaus’ preferences are privileged. A man

approaches her and is met with a firm refusal from Firdaus on account of his dirty nails whereas Firdaus “like[s] them to be clean” (92). This version of Firdaus is in sharp contrast to Sheikh Mahmoud’s obedient spouse. The othering of Firdaus manifested itself not only through the treatment she received as a girl and a wife but also through her perception of herself. The transition from a neglected piece of furniture to her tense thighs and a forgotten shoe to taut muscles depicts Firdaus’ understanding of the patriarchal structures that long haunted and humiliated her as a woman. While the previous lessons in life were imposed on Firdaus, the later years allow her to experience life on her terms and to draw several conclusions. Examining El Saadawi’s presentation of Firdaus’ emancipation as a prostitute, literary scholars Abdulwaheed Idris et al. in their article “Depiction of Women as the Primary Architects of their own Oppression” (2018) explain that as a prostitute the “confidence and, indeed, the boldness that suddenly overwhelms Firdaus speak volumes. El Saadawi here seems to be suggesting that the greatest opportunity that will avail an oppressed woman the desired emancipation is economic or financial independence” which Firdaus gets when she becomes a prostitute (210). In contrast to her experience as a married woman and through her standpoint, Firdaus “realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute” because she understood the world in its crudest form (El Saadawi 118). As a prostitute, Firdaus reminds us of Mozelle’s resilience in the face of patriarchal religious oppression. When Mozelle encounters a mob of religious fanatics, she uses her body to avert danger and saves Kirpal Kaur’s life. Similarly, Firdaus as a prostitute, depicts control over her body once she is free from patriarchal definitions and patriarchal structuring of her role as a woman. Talking to El Saadawi, Firdaus says that

A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows (117).

On the other hand, being a desirable prostitute, Firdaus is sought by many, and her worth keeps on increasing. As a prostitute, in a world of men, Firdaus was an “outsider within”. Men who had kept Firdaus entangled in religious and patriarchal constraints earlier, now worshipped her and wanted to be in her company to fulfill their desires; “A third man approached. He pronounced the secret word . . . ‘how much will you pay?’ ‘Ten pounds.’ ‘No, Twenty.’ ‘Your wishes are my orders,’ and he paid on the spot” (92). Firdaus also realizes that “as a prostitute [she] had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees” at the company she worked at briefly (102). In her unique position, she can utilize the weakness of men for personal gain reciprocating the manipulation she experienced as a young obedient girl.

This standpoint allows Firdaus to see the loopholes in the religious narrative presented by the men in her life. The connections Firdaus draws between a wife and a prostitute relate to her understanding of the world of religion and her current freedom. With the patriarchal exploitation of religion, Firdaus was a victim and a passive observer. As a prostitute, she is an active participant who negotiates her place in a world driven by men. Onyemaechi Udumukwu in the book *Signature of Women* (2007) reiterates the idea of

Firdaus' subjectivity through the theme of voice and action. Firdaus' voice becomes more defined and audible when she becomes a prostitute. This is evidenced in the novel through her preference for clean nails and the kind of men she chooses. Udumukwu comments that "the novel's internal landscape is an attempt to include woman into the scheme of things, to make the woman speak in her own terms" (63-64). As a prostitute, we see Firdaus as a decision-maker rather than a passive listener. She uses prostitution to her advantage being aware of her status as a marginal woman (Udumukwu 68). Although Firdaus is still subject to the laws of patriarchy, in being a prostitute she creates a third space for herself where she acknowledges that it is a world of men but also negotiates a position for herself.

A woman's life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off. I was able to convince myself that I had chosen this life of my own free will . . . my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women. A prostitute always says yes, and then names her price. If she says no she ceases to be a prostitute. I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so from time to time I said no (121).

By declaring herself as a pseudo-prostitute, Firdaus presents her negotiated space in the patriarchal society. Her standpoint allows her to fully acknowledge her marginalized position in the patriarchal structure and also equips her with the ability to use patriarchy to create a space for herself.

The novel presents us with two versions of Firdaus: one, the character that goes through all the life events narrated above, and second, the narrator telling her story to the author. While Firdaus – the character – takes her time to achieve a standpoint, Firdaus – the narrator – presents her mini-narrative in the form of a counter-story by telling her tale. Oumar Cherif Diop in his article “Beyond Point Zero: Reclaiming Agency in Nawal Al Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*” (2013) suggests that “it is indeed Firdaus’s very act of speech that becomes her triumph over all adverse circumstances of her life” (12). This act of speech presents us with a person who is aware of her position as a threat to patriarchy. After being sentenced to death for murder, Firdaus – the prisoner – refuses to see anyone. It is after multiple attempts from the author that Firdaus finally agrees and decides to present her mini-narrative. Firdaus’ voice takes the central stage from the very beginning: “Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you” (9). With this Firdaus sets the tone of authority that depicts her agency. The mini-narrative emerges through “the publication of this novel, as well as Firdaus’ agreement to speak to Saadawi” and both these “acts ... challenge the patriarchal system and authoritarian political structures of Egyptian society” (Pistola). The novel, therefore, can be seen as a form of Firdaus’ voice and agency that lays bare the patriarchal structure of the society Firdaus has been a part of. It is through Firdaus’ narrative that the reader learns about the patriarchal manipulation of religion. Seen from Firdaus’ perspective, the young Firdaus as a protagonist takes centre stage in the story and the tale becomes that of her negotiation with the power structures to live a life ‘better than that of other women’.

Firdaus' voice and agency emerge after she kills Marzouk – her pimp. Upon her decision to leave prostitution because of her enslavement by Marzouk, the pimp slaps Firdaus. Realizing the same pattern of patriarchal control, Firdaus took a knife and “buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. [Firdaus] struck the knife into almost every part of his body” (104). After killing Marzouk, Firdaus regains control over her body and that liberates her from the shackles of patriarchy. With her leap from being a prostitute to a murderess, Firdaus dismantled the patriarchal structures of control that had been imposed on her ever since she was a girl. Gohar (2016) agrees with this dismantling and highlights Firdaus' liberation by saying that “she is not a subaltern anymore as she succeeds in restoring her voice and breaking her silence” (182). With every thrust of the knife into Marzouk's body, Firdaus realizes that her negotiations with patriarchy would only get her limited freedom. Marzouk imposed himself on Firdaus to gain control over her and her money. It was ultimately Firdaus' head-on collision with patriarchal forms of control that finally liberates her body from men but at the same time confines her in prison. Through the murder, Firdaus manages to threaten the patriarchal structure. Diana Royer in her book *Critical Perspectives of the Works of Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian Writer and Activist* (2001) terms Firdaus' murder as her way of “punishing masculinities” that long kept her enchained (292). Another literary scholar Irene Salami-Agunloye in the article “All the Rulers are Men: Patriarchy and Resistance in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (2010) talks about the effects of Marzouk's murder. Salami-Agunloye explains that through the act of murder, Firdaus dismantles the “male codes that disguise the Arab/Islamic culture” while challenging

“the institutionalized patriarchal culture thereby undermining the dominant phallogocentric paradigm in the Arab/Islamic culture” (176). This challenging and subverting of the patriarchal metanarrative of control and oppression formulate Firdaus’ counter mini-narrative.

Although Firdaus is able to present her mini-narrative and give voice to her story, her murder conviction also confirms the prevalence and constant working of patriarchal modes of control that tend to silence women like Firdaus while retaining patriarchal equilibrium. Through the murder “she exposes the evil latent in a corrupt socio-religious structure and a stagnant hierarchal system” (Gohar 182). Firdaus highlights this idea when she says:

They were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man- there are thousands of people being killed every day- but because they are afraid to let me live (El Saadawi 110).

Firdaus is aware of the damage she did to the patriarchal structure and her death sentence is patriarchy’s way of resuming the control that Firdaus momentarily disrupted. Commenting on the repercussions of Firdaus’ act and the subsequent response by the legal system, Oumar Diop (2013) says that Firdaus belonged to “the set of disenfranchised women who are victims of patriarchal rule” (12). According to Diop, an important thing to consider here is “whether Firdaus’s act of revolt is an event that reveals the truth about women’s conditions and, subsequently transmutes into a force that destabilizes the patriarchal system” (12). In answering this question, Diop diverts the reader’s attention to a crucial reality by suggesting

that “neither the level of consciousness that Firdaus attains through her life-journey nor her act of killing the pimp are cause for a local mutation that might have propelled women into the socio-political arena” (12). On the other hand, Diop explains, that the legal system’s approach in sentencing Firdaus “further bracket her as an inexistent multiple” – meaning that she is reduced to a symbol of multiple, unacknowledged women who are trapped in similar circumstances but remain invisible or erased (12). Although Diop is right in pointing out that Firdaus’ execution reiterates the patriarchal narrative, I argue that despite her execution, Firdaus leaves a profound presence in the minds of people who listen/read her mini-narrative. Her execution might depict that patriarchy prevails in the end but by sharing her story Firdaus makes sure that her mini-narrative lives on. As a result, her execution does not necessarily mean that she is further bracketed into the patriarchal system; rather, it depicts the damage she did to patriarchal forms of control and the length the patriarchal system had to go to regain its control again.

In other words, Firdaus’ mini-narrative can be seen as a statement of the prevailing patriarchal norms that exploit religious, legal, and financial systems to marginalize women. Firdaus’ execution tells the reader that the system of patriarchal oppression is extremely well-structured and implemented at different stages in the lives of women. Apart from this, it also highlights how patriarchy operates as a perpetual equilibrium, where any act of resistance is met with extreme force, ensuring the continuation of its control across generations. Firdaus was exposed to this system at her parents’ home, and it accompanied Firdaus through all stages of her life. Her narrative highlights the presence of the patriarchal

system of control. The act of murdering the pimp was her anger unleashed – anger against her father, her uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, Marzouk, and all other men who constantly exploited Firdaus because of her gender creating a victim that was bound to resist with full force.

***The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) by Buchi Emecheta**

While patriarchy exploits Firdaus' position as a wife, *The Joys of Motherhood* portrays the patriarchal institutionalization of Nnu Ego's motherhood. This section examines the intersection of patriarchy and motherhood and argues that patriarchal exploitation of traditional roles of women as mothers sets unrealistic standards for women. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* takes the institution of motherhood a step further by exploring the realities associated with it through her protagonist Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego's transition from Ibuza to Lagos introduces multiple challenges to her traditional definition of being a mother. In the urbanized setting of Lagos, Nnu Ego is burdened with fulfilling her role as a mother as well as adjusting herself to the newly formed patriarchal structures. I argue that Nnu Ego's life as a mother in Lagos becomes a constant struggle between tradition and modernity mainly because of patriarchy's ability to conceal its source of oppression and create different forms of control over women, adapting to times of transition, that keep them in their marginalized position. Teresa Derrickson in an article titled "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: The Status of Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" (2002), also sheds light on this period of transition that placed women at a position of disadvantage. Derrickson explains that the transition that Nigeria experienced from a

traditional to Western capitalist setup “has occurred at the expense of women who have exchanged one form of patriarchy with another, while being stripped of former privileges and denied the right to new ones” (5). Nnu Ego’s suffering result from patriarchy’s ability to maneuver its way in a new setting and creating a female victim by trapping her in a newer system of patriarchal control.

The Joys of Motherhood presents Nnu Ego as the victim of patriarchal exploitation of her traditional role as a mother. Patriarchal tradition in the case of motherhood becomes a two-edged sword for Nnu Ego where she is marginalized if she is barren and burdened with back-breaking responsibilities when she becomes a mother. Nancy Bazin in her article “Feminist Perspectives in African Fiction” (1986) comments that “Emecheta explores the evils not of motherhood but of what Adrienne Rich calls ‘the institution of motherhood’ – that is, the way in which a woman's role as mother is used to render her an inferior, second-class citizen” (37). The institutionalization of motherhood paves the way for patriarchal exploitation that results in marginalization and victimization of women like Nnu Ego. This institutionalization creates patriarchal motherhood that eliminates the element of empowerment and turns motherhood into a self-sacrificing service that favors patriarchy. This version of imposed motherhood manipulates women’s role in the family structure and reinforces a form of patriarchal control rendering women inferior and “second-class citizens”.

The Joys of Motherhood depicts the importance of a woman’s role as a mother in Igbo society. Growing up with traditional beliefs, Nnu Ego looks forward to mothering her

children. Her first marriage to Amatokwu brings the shock of possible barrenness and subsequent challenges for an isolated Nnu Ego. As opposed to Firdaus' silent mother, Nnu Ego voices her concerns when it comes to the idea of motherhood. Talking to her husband she exclaims, "What am I going to do Amatokwu?" she crie[s] to her husband after the disappointment of another month." (Emecheta 31). Nnu Ego's anxiety stems from the fear of failing to meet traditional expectations that she is meant to fulfill as a woman. Marriage in Igbo tradition is not an isolated event but has deep cultural and religious roots that determine the lives of those involved. Talking about African traditions in general, John S. Mbiti in his *Introduction to African Religion* (1975) highlights the importance of children. Mbiti comments that "if no children are born that marriage often breaks up, although arrangements may be made to preserve it but to get children at the same time. If the wife is barren, then she and husband may arrange for him to have another wife so that children can be born in that family" (108). The statement reflects the importance of producing children and with it the role of women in traditional African society. According to tradition, bearing children, especially male children, makes a woman whole. The struggle to become a mother becomes a struggle to fulfil her role as a woman for Nnu Ego.

In terms of her traditional teachings, Nnu Ego saw herself as a failure in her first marriage to Amatokwu. "Nnu Ego and her new husband Amatokwu were very happy; yet Nnu Ego was surprised that, as the months passed, she was failing everybody. There was no child" (31). Nnu Ego's desperation becomes evident as time goes on and Amatokwu takes a second wife to fulfill his role in building the family structure. Discussing the importance of

motherhood in “Women in Igbo Life and Thought” (2000), Joseph Agbasiere denotes motherhood as “the keystone of Igbo social relations” (85). Moreover, Agbasiere explains that the prevalence of the theme of motherhood in Igbo proverbs presents motherhood as an important part of womanhood. The proverbs such as “Nne bu ihe ukwu” meaning “Motherhood is a very significant thing,” and “Nne amaka” or “Motherhood is beautiful” highlight the significance of motherhood as an institution. While Nnu Ego understands the importance of being a mother, she feared punishment and ostracization for failing to be a mother. Expressing a similar sentiment, scholar Gloria Chukukere writing in 1995 reiterates that “a barren woman is considered a social failure and invites the wrath of her family and society” (7).

Though motherhood was traditionally viewed as a fundamental aspect of womanhood, in Igbo culture, it transcended mere childbearing to symbolize a source of power for women. Nwando Achebe in his text *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland* (2005) highlights the parallel between motherhood and power. Achebe explains that “the act of reproduction that advances a wife into motherhood also ushers in a prolonged season of enhanced power, for once a woman becomes a mother she remains forever more powerful than a wife” (29). Moreover, producing male children meant more authority as compared to female children. According to Achebe, this system of motherhood is a depiction of patriarchal Igbo society (29). The traditional values, therefore, placed immense importance on the institution of motherhood

and Nnu Ego being a receptor of the traditional teaching regarding gender roles equated womanhood with motherhood.

The pressure imposed by the patriarchal definition of motherhood constantly pushed women towards the periphery by equating their identity with the idea of giving birth. Years later, when Nnu Ego is married for the second time, she comes close to being a mother but loses her child soon after he is born. On losing her first child, Nnu Ego plans to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge in Lagos. She thinks that after death “she would be able to seek out and meet her *chi*, her personal god, and she would ask her why she had punished her so” (Emecheta 10). Although Nnu Ego decides to punish herself for the death of her child, Firdaus’ mother was beaten by her father when a male child died. These incidents unite the two women in their suffering that results from patriarchal expectations. The patriarchal conception of motherhood leads Nnu Ego to believe that her primary purpose is to be a mother, rendering it the sole meaningful aspect of her existence. In the same manner, the beatings that Firdaus’ mother receives from her husband result from falling short of fulfilling the ideals set by patriarchal motherhood, that is, male children must live. In their discussion about the role of women as mothers in African societies, Atinuke Olubukola Okunade in his chapter titled “The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion” (2022) explains the dominance of women as mothers in African traditions.

This is because women themselves had the ability to create because they were able to give birth. In every society, the most important aspect of life and survival is a family.

The women are often the backbone of the family in traditional Africa. They possessed

the power that binds society together. In fact, the existence and survival of the family depended a great deal on the African women (221).

In connection to tradition, the importance of family structure remains at the center and Nnu Ego's inability to build that structure was seen as proof of her failure as a woman. The act of committing suicide seems reasonable to the patriarchal society in which Nnu Ego lives as they conclude that she "is not mad after all" (Emecheta 62). They consider Nnu Ego's act justified as they believe "that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman" (Emecheta 62). Literary scholar Eustace Palmer in his article "The Feminine Point of View: Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" (1983) highlights this idea when he says that man "is the standard and the point of reference in this society ... Women are clearly the underdogs, and they are supposed to be content if their man merely sleeps with them even if he fails to discharge his other obligations" (40). This is one of the reasons that Nnu Ego made multiple sacrifices to her chi to restore her purpose in life. Although she spent the initial years of her life seeking what traditions had ordained for her, her later years in life are plagued with fulfilling her role as a mother. In her attempt to fulfill her traditional role as a wife and mother, Nnu Ego blurs the line between self-sacrifice and motherhood.

While motherhood itself might not have been challenging for Nnu Ego, its intersection with patriarchy and cultural transition that paved the way for patriarchal exploitation made the institution of motherhood oppressive, marginalizing Nnu Ego to a greater extent. In the case of Nnu Ego, challenges and struggles multiplied when patriarchy exploited traditional gender values to place the burden on women. After her second marriage

to Nnaife, Nnu Ego and her chi finally came to terms with each other. Nnaife looked nothing like an Ibuza man. With his bulging belly and lethargic ways, he appeared to be the complete opposite of Amtokwu – Nnu Ego’s first husband. Looking at him, Nnu Ego wanted to go back to her father. However, despite her disapproval of Nnaife’s appearance, Nnu Ego dismissed the thought of going back. Her desire to become a mother dominated her feelings of disgust toward Nnaife.

“O my chi,” she prayed as she rolled painfully to her other side on the raffia bed, “O my dear mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance. Oh, please help me, all you my ancestors” (Emecheta 44-45).

With Nnaife, Nnu Ego experiences the joy of being a mother and her life reflects the irony of the joy that comes with motherhood. Being in Lagos, Nnu Ego found that her notion of being a traditional woman was tested. Nnaife served a Christian family and since he did not marry Nnu Ego at a church, their marriage was void. This is where Nnu Ego’s traditional values started clashing with the values of urban Lagos. While she remains a traditional Igbo woman, Nnaife emerges as the man of Lagos: “What will they say in the church? We have not been married there. . . so keep it quiet, will you?” (50). The news of birth thus highlights the conflict between Nnu Ego’s tradition and Nnaife’s urbanized ways. This conflict exposes Nnu Ego’s suffering: the impracticality of her traditional values becomes stark in Lagos and she is left with the difficulty of unlearning the demands of her tradition while learning about the stresses of urban Lagos. In relation to Nnu Ego’s predicament, research scholar Marie A.

Umeh – writing in 1987 – highlights that “*The Joys of Motherhood* is a study of the victimization and enslavement of traditional Igbo women to the dictates of traditional Igbo culture” which are exploited to benefit patriarchy (31). Umeh is right in pointing out that Nnu Ego’s troubles multiply because patriarchal norms expect her to behave as a traditional woman in urban Lagos. The incompatibility of Nnu Ego’s traditional behaviour and Lagos’ urbanized ways leaves Nnu Ego as a victim and allows Nnaife to exploit her identity as a mother to his advantage.

This conflict between Nnu Ego and Nnaife becomes problematic for Nnu Ego because she has identified herself in terms of her role as a traditional woman. While Nnu Ego behaved according to her learned traditions, Nnaife’s approach was based on convenience. The conflict between Nnu Ego’s tradition and Nnaife’s urbanized ways also manifested in economic terms which resulted in pushing Nnu Ego to the periphery.

In Ibuza, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role. Nnu Ego told herself that the life she had indulged in with the baby Ngozi had been very risky: she had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child. This time she was going to play it according to the new rules (Emecheta 82).

Being forced by the patriarchy into being a traditional woman in Lagos, Nnu Ego works to contribute while being a mother to her first child, Ngozi. Through her role as a mother, Nnu Ego had to assume the position of a subject in Lagos. In becoming the center for her children

by being the mother figure, she tries to negotiate the new space in an urbanized setting. In a traditional setting, the role of the father was to provide for the family and Nnaife's constant failure in doing so was forcing Nnu Ego to provide for her children as well. Along with this, Nnaife absolved himself from taking any responsibility for female children. When Nnu Ego gives birth to female twins, Nnaife exclaims, "Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? So where will we all sleep? How will they eat?" ... He didn't even mention their names" (141). Scholars Stanley Ordu and Better Odukwu in their article "Articulation of Womanism in African Literature" (2022) classify Nnaife's questions as "a reprimand for his older wife's failure to bear male offspring" (9). Moreover, by "withholding their names, Nnaife denies responsibility for their well-being" (9). A similar indifference towards females can be seen in *Woman at Point Zero* when Firdaus talks about the death of female children. Talking to El Saadawi, Firdaus narrates: "When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night" (23). The lack of change in Firdaus' father's routine and Nnaife's disappointment upon seeing female twins highlight the marginalized status of the female figure and the patriarchal process that justifies and perpetuates such marginalization. Commenting on gender dynamics Adepeju Johnson-Bashua in his chapter titled "African Traditional Religion, Gender Equality, and Feminism" (2022) explains that "gender relations in Africa have a bearing on familial lines, which assigns roles to both sexes and makes the household duties a woman's principal responsibility" (303). While this might help Nnu Ego in a traditional setting, Lagos merely imposed traditional roles with an added burden of patriarchal exploitation.

The intersection of tradition and patriarchy presented various ways of marginalizing Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego's traditional role as a woman became doubly challenging through polygamy and its inevitable repercussions faced by Nnu Ego. While Nnaife exploited traditional values as he pleased, Nnu Ego had to constantly maneuver her role as a woman and a mother in Lagos. Per the norms of Ibuza, after the death of his elder brother, Nnaife, as per tradition, is expected to inherit his wives and children.

Nnaife's brother, the very man who had negotiated for her, had three wives even when she was still at home in Ibuza. Surely, surely people would not expect Nnaife to inherit them? She looked round her wildly, and was able to read from the masked faces of the men sitting around that they had thought of that and were here to help their friend and relative solve this knotty problem (Emecheta 116).

The burden placed upon Nnu Ego materialized through Nnaife's transition from his Christian ways to traditional Ibuza customs. Earlier Nnu Ego struggled to incorporate Nnaife's urbanized approach into her life as a traditional Ibuza woman whereas now, the problem was reverting to the traditions that Nnu Ego thought she might never engage with. Within the domain of her traditional values, Nnu Ego had an internal struggle as a wife and as a mother. Mohamed Fathi Helaly in his article "Cultural Collision and Women Victimization in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" (2016) explains that Nnu Ego was placed in "a society where African women are required to continue performing traditional duties and responsibilities" making their patriarchal subjugation inevitable (118). This brings us back to Teresa Derrickson's notion that Nigerian transition from tradition to Western system "has

occurred at the expense of women who have exchanged one form of patriarchy with another, while being stripped of former privileges and denied the right to new ones” (5). As Nnaife’s wife Nnu Ego was expected to accept this change and being a mother in Lagos, and she was tormented by the thought of not being able to feed her children. Nnaife’s fluctuating allegiance to his preferred way of life placed an additional burden on Nnu Ego’s motherhood. Nnaife’s dual position served his patriarchal standards while marginalizing Nnu Ego. As a result “[Nnu Ego] hated this thing called the European way; these people called Christians taught that a man must marry only one wife. Now here was Nnaife with not just two but planning to have maybe three or four in the not so distant future” forcing her to accept traditional ways in an urbanized setting (120).

This imposition of polygamy was a challenge to Nnu Ego’s identity as a wife. In this regard, Nnu Ego was not given a choice; rather it was a Nnaife’s right given to him by traditional Ibuza customs and Nnu Ego had to accept. Nnu Ego’s challenged identity not only depicts her lack of agency but also portrays the leverage traditional customs give men. While Nnaife was never questioned for working under Christian employers, Nnu Ego was expected to conform to the customary laws that granted Nnaife the right to inherit wives. In this case, Nnu Ego’s marginalization resulted because of her position as a woman as compared to Nnaife’s elevated patriarchal status.

Nnaife, being a man, had the privilege to be traditional in Lagos whenever the situation served his purpose whereas for Nnu Ego tradition was only evoked when her sacrifice was needed. This portrayed the advantage Nnaife had over Nnu Ego in Lagos.

When Nnaife needed the job, he maintained his Christianity while setting traditional Ibuza customs aside whereas when he felt he could get a younger wife, he reverted to his traditions. For Nnu Ego, the line dividing tradition and urbanized Lagos was starkly defined. For example, after Adaku's [Nnaife's second wife] arrival in Lagos, the financial situation of Nnaife's house deteriorates. Nnu Ego could not earn enough and Nnaife refused to give more money at home. As a result, both Nnu Ego and Adaku decide to go on strike. Janet E. Pool in her study "A Cross-Comparative Study of Aspects of Conjugal Behavior among Women of Three West African Countries" (1972) explains that co-wives often "form[ed] a power-bloc within the family" that allowed them to convince their stubborn husbands into doing things they otherwise would not (252). Nnu Ego and Adaku attempted to rely on their traditional power structure that polygamy would allow in Ibuza. Explaining the role of female solidarity through strikes in Igbo culture literary scholar Judith van Allen in her chapter "Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women" (1972) explains that

"Sitting on a man" or a woman, boycotts and strikes were the women's main weapons. To "sit on" or "make war on" a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question ... A man might be sanctioned in this way for mistreating his wife, for violating the women's market rules, or for letting his cows eat the women's crops. The women would stay at his hut throughout the day, and late into the night, if necessary, until he repented and promised to mend his ways. Although this could hardly have been a pleasant experience for the

offending man, it was considered legitimate and no man would consider intervening (170).

While Nnu Ego and Adaku wanted to utilize the same legitimate system of expressing their frustration over finances, their expression of solidarity and retaliation against Nnaife did not work in urban Lagos. Refusing to bear their responsibility, Nnaife responds by saying “You’d better carry on the way you started. It’s your responsibility to feed your children as best as you can . . . Sell your lappas. You [Nnu Ego] are the chief wife. Use your head . . . My chi has taught you a lesson” (136-37). While Nnaife himself could implement traditional values that favored him, Nnu Ego and Adaku sunk deeper into the abyss. In this situation both Adaku and Nnu Ego suffered because of patriarchal oppression: Nnu Ego was denied food for her children and Adaku was beaten for transgressing her limits. Richmond Amgbo Blay et al. in their article “Unpacking the Image of the Female Character” (2022) while discussing Nnaife’s act of beating Adaku who was pregnant state that the episode depicts the role of man “in a patriarchal society. No one raises any alarm about Nnaife’s behaviour because in a patriarchal Ibo society, wife battery is not frowned upon because the women themselves consider it as part of their marital lives” (337). While these women were expected to be traditional Igbo women in terms of marriage and motherhood, the patriarchal exploitation of their roles marginalized them consistently.

The burden of feeding her children fell upon Nnu Ego and Nnaife conveniently absolved himself of this responsibility highlighting the exploitation of Nnu Ego’s role as a mother. As opposed to this, *Woman at Point Zero* places food in the patriarchal domain.

Firdaus is forcibly married off to Sheikh Mahmoud because she ate “twice as much as any of [her uncle’s] children” (El Saadawi 46). After her marriage, her eating habits are scrutinized by her husband. Examining patriarchal control over Firdaus, Firenze Giunti in her article “On the Condition of the Colonized Woman: The Nervous Condition of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*” (2001) explains that “eating was always associated with male power. Her mother hid food from Firdaus to feed her father ... Only after her father, her brothers, and her husband had eaten insatiably she could finally have some food, while all the men in her family watched her” (432). On the other hand, we see Nnu Ego fighting with her husband to provide food for her children. By doing so, Nnu Ego is forced into being a father as well as a mother to her children. While patriarchal control is exerted upon Firdaus through the watchful eyes of men, Nnu Ego experiences that control through the abuse of her role as a mother.

Nnaife’s patriarchal dominance resulted from his wives’ dependency on him. Unlike in Ibuza, Lagos crippled Nnu Ego financially and made her Nnaife’s pawn. Nnu Ego highlights this difference when she says that “at home in Ibuza she would have had her own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position [as senior wife to Adaku], but here in Lagos, ... she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends meet” (186). This depicts the additional burden Nnu Ego had in Lagos. In Ibuza, feeding the family was solely the man’s responsibility. Women played their part by producing some crops while their children were looked after by senior members of the family. In Lagos, Nnaife knew that he had authority over his women and this authority came from being a man and this established

his patriarchal rule over Nnu Ego and Adaku. According to Johnson-Bashua (2022) “African sexual rules are considered as concluded issues handed down by religion and society . . . any attempt to challenge or alter these established gender norms is perceived as a threat to accepted norms and may inspire social anarchy” (306). Since Nnaife was the one in charge, he defined gender roles and exploited traditional Ibuza gender roles as he pleased. At the birth of his first child, Nnaife did not celebrate according to Ibuza customs since he was a Christian. Furthermore, Nnaife also ignored Ibuza customs when he worked in the army. Nnu Ego questions him: “Have you forgotten that it is a curse in Ibuza for a respectable woman to sleep with a soldier? Have you forgotten the customs of our people completely, Nnaife?” (Emecheta 171). However, the same Nnaife gladly inherits his brother’s wives after his brother’s death. Since the inheritance would have given Nnaife a young wife (Adaku), the incompatibility between Ibuza traditions and Lagos immediately dissolved since patriarchy benefitted from this erasure. Nnaife’s convenient exploitation of Igbo traditions is similar to Firdaus’ father and uncle’s exploitation of religion. As Nnaife applies Ibuza customs in Lagos by taking his dead brother’s wives since it benefitted him, Firdaus’ uncle also uses Firdaus' dowry for himself. In doing so, he performs the religious act of marrying Firdaus off to a man while exploiting the same religion and using the dowry, which belonged to Firdaus, for himself. Similarly, Firdaus’ father nods in agreement to the Friday sermons, and at the same time, he knows “how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night” (El Saadawi 14). Resultantly, the lives of these men converge in terms of creating a marginalized and victimized female figure while using tradition and/or religion as a façade that hides patriarchal control.

Despite Nnu Ego's staunch adherence to her traditional role as a mother, she is able to realize her constant marginalization through patriarchal manipulation of traditional roles of women as mothers and wives. The constant reminders Nnu Ego received were of her responsibility as a wife and mother. Her interior monologue creates a mini-narrative that conveys to the reader Nnu Ego's plight as well as the awareness of her exploitation:

It occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as a senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children (Emecheta 137).

Nnu Ego realizes that Nnaife, as well as the men who brought him a second wife, know that they have an advantage over women. They dictate and traditional women like Nnu Ego follow. According to Marie A. Umeh (1982) "in *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta extends her metaphor of the enslaved Igbo woman, arguing that the society also programs women to be slaves of their male offspring as well as their husbands" (7). Nnu Ego slavery results from Nnaife's knowledge of Nnu Ego's adherence to traditional values. Through the understanding of her circumstances, Nnu Ego develops a mini-narrative. Knowing that she is imprisoned through her traditional roles, Nnu Ego's perspective develops a narrative different from the patriarchal narrative of control and domination and challenges it by presenting the nuances associated with her role as a mother and a senior wife. Through Nnu

Ego's mini-narrative, Emecheta attempts to expose the patriarchal exploitation of the institution of motherhood and marriage. Literary scholars Olumide Ogunrotimi and Omolara Kikelomo Owoeye in their article "Notions of Alienation and Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" (2019) explain that Emecheta dissects marriage and motherhood "as avenues for exploitation, particularly when in her attempt to satisfy the requisites of marital felicity and maternal signification, a woman ostracizes herself from her family and other women who otherwise could have provided succour in time of need" (99). In forming a mini-narrative, Nnu Ego's thoughts highlight different forms of patriarchal control that either confine women within their traditional roles (Nnu Ego as a mother) or marginalize them for not fulfilling their traditional roles (Nnu Ego's barrenness in her first marriage). Solomon Edebor et al. in their article "A Redefinition of Womanhood: A Literary Exploration of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" (2021) suggest that "Emecheta has decisively used Nnu Ego's ordeal to interrogate the burden of obligatory motherhood" (191). Through Nnu Ego's mini-narrative, Emecheta makes the reader see the reality of the patriarchally influenced notion of motherhood and shows how Nnu Ego "becomes so absorbed in the task of caring for her children that she does not rouse herself for a moment to become 'something' and so discovers that she doesn't 'know how to be anything else but a mother'" (192). While Nnu Ego suffers at the hands of her husband because of the imposed traditional values, Nnaife enjoys his role as the head of the family creating a gender gap that pushes Nnu Ego towards the periphery. Her role as a senior wife created a façade of ownership and authority whereas her reality forced her to beg Nnaife for money to feed their children. Through Nnu Ego, Emecheta depicts the double standards of men who remind

women of their role when it comes to sacrifice “But if there is something to gain, [women like Nnu Ego are] told to be quiet because wanting a good thing does not befit [their] situation” (Emecheta 134).

In contrast to Nnu Ego’s mini-narrative of awareness of patriarchal exploitation of women’s traditional roles is Adaku’s mini-narrative of subversion. With two daughters and her failure to produce a son, Adaku did not fit the definition of a traditional woman from the very beginning. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Adaku presents a counter story: one rooted in lack from which she builds her world similar to that of Firdaus. While Adaku comes to Lagos to follow tradition and build the life Nnu Ego is living, she ends up detaching herself from the shackles of tradition that define a woman based on her ability to produce male heirs. During her many clashes with Nnu Ego, Adaku slowly sees her place in the household as a second wife. As opposed to Nnu Ego’s blind adherence to tradition, Adaku views tradition critically. Tradition and its patriarchal exploitation in the case of Nnu Ego becomes a tool that utilizes her role as a mother and manipulates her into giving all she has. On the other hand, Adaku does not allow this manipulation. Umeh (1982) expresses a similar idea explaining that “Adaku's independent character is juxtaposed to Nnu Ego's subservient nature. In promoting the feminist's cause, Emecheta balances Nnu Ego's traditionalism with Adaku's tendencies toward female emancipation” (5). Looking at Nnu Ego’s worries, Adaku observes, “Oh, senior wife, I think you are sometimes more traditional than people at home in Ibuza. You worry too much to please our husband” (Emecheta 127). For Nnu Ego, pleasing Nnaife means providing food for her children, whereas Adaku believes in

negotiating with traditional beliefs and creating a space that centers her subjectivity as a woman. Finding herself beyond tradition while being a part of it was not an option. This was made clear during one of her fights with Nnu Ego, where the men of the family openly supported Nnu Ego and reminded Adaku of her status as a mother without a son.

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, *the daughter of whoever you are*, are committing an unforgivable sin?" Nwakusor reminded her.

"Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality... I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality. The only woman [Nnu Ego] who is immortalising your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business. If I were in your shoes, I should go home and consult my *chi* to find out why male offspring have been denied me (Emecheta emphasis mine 166).

Instead of using Adaku's father's name, Nwakusor dismisses her lineage by saying "the daughter of whoever you are". This happens because Adaku is a mother of two daughters and having only daughters does not help in taking the family name forward. Nwakusor's reference to the idea of immortality particularly refers to the role of a woman in Ibo culture and the expectations of traditional religion for women. In mothering sons, a woman fulfills her role by producing progeny and ensuring the immortality of her husband's tribe. If she fails to do so, she is a failed woman, and her presence is a mere burden. This is the reason for Nnu Ego's obsession with becoming a mother; it fulfills her as a woman and secures her place in society. By reminding Adaku of her insignificance in comparison to Nnu Ego,

Nwakusor not only confirms the traditional norm defined for women but also reinforces the existence of a hierarchy between women, with Nnu Ego on top. Coming from Nwakusor, who is Nnaife's older brother and the head of the Owulum family, it also suggests that this hierarchy is backed up by patriarchy and therefore Adaku will have multiple fronts to fight at.

This double othering of Adaku forces her to establish her own system of defining her worth as a woman and with the desire to build a different future for her daughters. The constant ignorance of her role as a woman outside of the patriarchal tradition of producing male children forces Adaku to shun the traditional belief system and engage with an entirely new way of life: prostitution. Richmond Amgbo Blay et al. (2022) in their discussion of Adaku's decision comments that "Adaku's singular action is in line with the African feminist's goal of advocating for the need for equity between men and women, and removal of all entrenched practices that elevate men above women" (336). As a result, this diversion from patriarchal norms will allow "all the negative entrenched cultural practices perceived as detrimental to women to be eradicated significantly" (336). On the other hand, Nnu Ego was part of the system that pushed Adaku to the periphery. She could sympathize with Adaku as a woman but could never imagine moving away from her traditional setup no matter her circumstances.

As soon as the men went, Nnu Ego crawled into her bed, which she had now covered with hand-spun mats as she had no money for bed-sheets. Her feelings were mixed, and she wanted to weep, for what she did not know. She felt sorry for Adaku, and the

men's hurtful treatment of her, but would Adaku understand if she should tell her so? She also felt relief, knowing that her own fate could so easily have been like Adaku's. Yet all because *she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty*, in her nail biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room ... *Oh, it was a confusing world* (emphasis mine 167).

The statement here highlights Nnu Ego's internal conflict that expresses her realization of the patriarchal exploitation of her role as a mother. Nnu Ego fears her fate being similar to that of Adaku's but also realizes the way patriarchy manipulates women into thinking that motherhood should be a fulfilling experience despite the hardships.

Nnu Ego's conflict here presents the institution of motherhood that keeps her marginalized and forces her to think that contentment should solely come from being a mother. Through Nnu Ego's role as a mother within the laws defined by tradition, Emecheta portrays the invisible shackles Nnu Ego has grown up with. Ogunrotimi and Owoeye (2019) reiterate this idea with the statement that "Emecheta's envisioning of Nnu Ego's tragedy encapsulates a realization of the true nature of marriage and the precariousness of motherhood (99). It was the traditional system that became oppressive through patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Her desire for being a mother and the following challenges were all a part of fulfilling her role as a woman; a role defined by men and justified through traditional means in keeping Nnu Ego entangled. Adaku appears fierce because of her ability to see and remove these shackles. Her actions are not only against tradition but also against all the women who adhere to these laws without dispute. Ogunrotimi and Owoeye explain

that “when she [Adaku] discovers that having female children is perceived as a curse, and that Nnaife cannot adequately provide for her and her children, ..., she decides to free herself from the shackles of societal expectations (101). After the fight Adaku makes up her mind and informs Nnu Ego of her intentions: “‘I’m leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife.’ “To go and worship your *chi* ?” “My *chi* be damned! I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi* !” (169). This marks the moment of Adaku’s reawakening as a woman, unlike her prior identity as an Ibuza woman. In doing so “Adaku decides to revolt, radicalized by an unquenchable desire for personal freedom as an individual and a maternal instinct that realizes the unhealthiness of allowing her daughters to grow up in such an environment (Ogunrotimi et al. 101). By damning her *chi*, Adaku is voicing her hatred and disgust for all the customs and traditions that kept her trapped because of her gender and limited her role as a woman.

Through Adaku’s transitioning, the novel directs attention towards girls and their education which had previously been an absent subject. Nnu Ego’s girls were merely tools for paying the boys’ school fees through their bride price whereas Adaku’s break from tradition created a space for her daughters to have their own identity beginning with access to education. Similar to Nnu Ego’s girls, Firdaus had been a tool to get a dowry and her status remained secondary to the male figures in her life. Voicing her interest in getting an education, Firdaus informs her uncle that she would like to go to El Azhar and is told that it is a place for men. Talking to El Saadawi Firdaus explains that “El Azhar was an awesome world peopled only by men, and my uncle was one of them, was a man” (27). Being a

woman automatically deprives Firdaus and Nnu Ego's daughters of education. Shifting away from the path of oppression, Adaku makes a different choice. She deviates from the norms and creates a third space for herself and her daughters. Talking to Nnu Ego, Adaku says

I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future. Many rich Yoruba families send their daughters to school these days; I shall do the same with mine (168).

By becoming the decision-maker for herself and her daughters, Adaku centralizes her character and eliminates the double marginalization she experienced as an Ibuza woman. She eliminates herself from the hierarchy set by Nwakuor and develops her own narrative in which she resides at the center. Similar to Firdaus, Adaku's profession depends on men. In talking to Nnu Ego, Adaku expresses this understanding: "I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters, though I shall not do so without male companionship.' She laughed again. 'They do have their uses'" (171). Although Adaku still needs 'male companionship', as a prostitute she is not judged based on being a mother of daughters and a non-conformist. While patriarchal manipulation of religion forces Firdaus to be a prostitute, Adaku's decision is facilitated by the patriarchal definition of womanhood based on tradition. In both cases, women are pushed towards prostitution by the men in their lives. While Firdaus retaliates against the patriarchal oppression imposed by her father, uncle, and husband, Adaku reacts to the patriarchal tailoring of women's roles. However, in the case of Firdaus, men were the forces against whom she was fighting whereas, for Adaku,

women were a part of the process that marginalized other women. In her conversation with Nnu Ego, Adaku expresses this concern and says “Maybe you're right again, my senior. Yet the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own” (Emecheta 169). Prostitution became her refuge not only from the hold of traditional religion but also from the women who were othering Adaku because she was perceived as a failed woman.

In becoming a prostitute, Adaku shifts the paradigm and formulates a new definition for herself. She now is a prostitute with two educated daughters. Her new self presents intersecting identities that portray Adaku as a mother of daughters, a prostitute, and a woman defying patriarchal traditions. Solomon Edebor et al. (2021) while exploring Adaku’s character suggest that “Emecheta purposively creates the character of Adaku to emphasize her disdain for persistent cultural bigotry that embeds women in men’s cage and renders them useless to themselves” (196). In doing so, Adaku’s mini-narrative gives us “a new definition of for all women, contrary to societally constructed feminine labels” – as explained by Solomon Edebor et al. (196). While Adaku moves on, Nnu Ego wishes her well from her ever-aggravating conditions: “may your *chi* be your guide, Adaku,” Nnu Ego whispered almost inaudibly as she crawled further into the urine-stained mats on her bug-ridden bed, enjoying the knowledge of her motherhood” (169). The quotation highlights the complexity of the institution of motherhood. Although Nnu Ego wishes Adaku well, her blessing conveys mixed feelings: pity for Adaku’s loss of family as per Nnu Ego and envy for her

prosperity. These feelings as well as Nnu Ego's current situation highlight the irony: she fulfilled her traditional role of being a mother and enjoys the sense of motherhood yet with every child she falls deeper into the agony of poverty and misery. Nnu Ego is bound by her service to patriarchal traditions that taught her that she would have children in her old age, that it is mothers who reap the benefit of raising boys and that power comes with motherhood.

While Nnu Ego is an embodiment of tradition, Adaku presents defiance against these norms. Adaku's choice of being a prostitute liberates her from the confines of traditional beliefs and creates space for her development. In remaining true to her traditional values, Nnu Ego realizes that she has only inherited burdens and struggles whereas Adaku not only prospers financially but also transforms as a woman. "Nnu Ego noticed that Adaku was better dressed – not that she wore anything new, but she put on her good clothes even on ordinary market days. She laughed a lot now; Nnu Ego had never known her to have such a sense of humour" (171). Compared to Adaku, Nnu Ego was still dealing with her old struggles, shortage of food, boys' education, and birth of daughters.

The arrival of her new twin daughters had a subduing effect upon Nnu Ego . . . Men--all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names going. But did not a woman have to bear the woman-child who would later bear the sons? "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" she prayed desperately (186).

All the while Nnu Ego adheres to the traditional notion of womanhood, she questions and pokes holes in the patriarchal narrative of exploitation that pushes women to the periphery. In this way, Nnu Ego's mini-narrative runs parallel to her traditionalism. While hers is a subdued protest, it remains active throughout.

Nnu Ego's understanding of her position as a woman and mother takes a different form during times of struggle. With the birth of her daughters, her mind shifts towards the reductive role of women imposed by men through traditional values. During other times, she rejoices and relies on her role as a mother of sons since her traditional values assure her of a peaceful old age. On the other hand, Adaku eliminates the notion of reliance on tradition or children. By placing herself at the center, she learns to consider her worth and aims at making her daughters worthy.

Adaku was living up to the meaning of her name: "the daughter of wealth". She told Nnu Ego that was giving up selling beans and peppers, she was buying a larger stall on which she would have abada material for lappas . . . "I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters" (170).

The dignity that Adaku associates with herself is seen in Firdaus as well. Despite their profession, Adaku and Firdaus can see themselves as dignified women because they place themselves at the center while creating a narrative of their own. They decide not to live by patriarchal rules of tradition that pushed them to the periphery. In their own story, they do not emerge as marginalized figures but as women who have formulated a counter-narrative that begins with them. The development of this narrative, however, becomes possible only when

Firdaus and Adaku step away from religious and traditional teachings that are manipulated by men to subjugate and suppress women. Adaku becomes the woman Nnu Ego so desperately searches for, “a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage” (186).

The impact of tradition and its patriarchal exploitation has played a major role suppressing and marginalizing women. Nnu Ego’s motherhood has been utilized by the male elites in the family to bind her to the traditionally defined roles of a woman. Firdaus became a victim of patriarchal definitions of marriage and Adaku became an outsider because she defied religious/traditional laws. In all these roles, the intersection of patriarchy and tradition works against women. Teresa Derrickson in the article “Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context” (2002) comments that “Adaku, who chooses that path, finds herself rejected by her own people. Nnu Ego, who chooses the opposite, dies destitute and alone. In the end, each path is condemned as unacceptable for African women” and this happens to be “both the point of Emecheta's novel and the problem it cannot solve” (Derrickson). While Adaku consciously decided to deviate from the norm, Nnu Ego’s adherence to the rules of patriarchy and tradition left her alone in the end. However, Nnu Ego’s mini-narrative becomes dominant after her death. After having a grand funeral arranged by her older son: “Stories afterwards, however, said that Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make woman fertile, she never did. . . Nnu Ego had it all, yet she did not answer prayers for children” (Emecheta 224). Nnu Ego's final word was denying women who came asking for children. The realization of her own exploitation

throughout her life materialized in the form of her final word of refusal. Nnu Ego's mini-narrative was not only a statement of the injustices recorded through her agonies but also of the complicity of men in making the institution of motherhood oppressive for women. Nnu Ego's denial of people's wishes for children was also the refusal to let the patriarchal narrative of motherhood function.

By focusing on Nnu Ego and Adaku, this section depicts the oppressive role of patriarchal motherhood. By institutionalizing motherhood, this section portrays that patriarchy reveres motherhood while devaluing and marginalizing mothers at the same time. Nnu Ego's predicament lies in adherence to the institution of motherhood as constructed by the patriarchal figures in her life as seen in her mini-narrative—her spirit lingers, remembered only as a mother rather than as an individual. However, her refusal to grant wishes for children remains an important part of her mini-narrative that depicts her understanding of patriarchal structures and the institutionalization of motherhood. Adaku, on the other hand, emerges as a nonconformist and deviates from patriarchy's definition of womanhood fulfilling Nnu Ego's unspoken vision of a woman who is fulfilled in herself rather than being defined by motherhood. In doing so, she creates a space for herself and a future for her daughter constructing an identity that is free from patriarchal traditional influences. Positioned on a spectrum of female agency and resistance, Nnu Ego and Adaku's narratives contrast sharply. Nnu Ego's understanding resonates closely with Roop's understanding of patriarchal norms of control but unlike Roop, Nnu Ego is unable to disrupt the patriarchal narrative since she remains bound by the expectations imposed on her as

Kusum was. Adaku, however, actively carves out an alternative path, akin to other women like Firdaus and Mozelle who, in their own ways, resist patriarchal erasure through their chosen forms of self-assertion.

Things Fall Apart (1995) by Chinua Achebe

While the previous sections depicted the patriarchal manipulation of women's roles as wives and mothers, this section examines how patriarchal values are *constructed to create* conditions that enable this manipulation. This section suggests that the patriarchal innovation of the definition of manhood – as depicted through proverbs and the way characters speak and think – places the male figure at the top of the hierarchy while othering the female members as well as men who do not fit the patriarchal definition of manhood. Innovation, in this context, does not refer to progressive reform in the modern sense, but to an *intensified reinterpretation* of existing norms – Okonkwo does not invent new ideals of manhood but pushes traditional Ibo masculinity to its most rigid, performative, and exclusionary extreme. Even in the more literal sense of the word, however, innovation still applies: for Okonkwo, this intensification represents personal and social progress. His development from masculinity to hypermasculinity is, in his view, a deliberate evolution – one that advances his goals as a patriarch and constructs what he sees as the truest and most traditional version of being a man. In this way, Okonkwo's innovation is both a distortion and a consolidation of patriarchal power.

While patriarchal modification of and control over women's roles is one of the ways through which women are marginalized, another is through the placement of the male on a

pedestal through definitions that portray grandeur and demands ultimate obedience from female counterparts. This hierarchy of the male as superior can be seen in Firdaus' uncle and her father when they constantly exploit religion to marginalize Firdaus and take advantage of her status as a woman. In the same manner, Nnu Ego's husband Nnaife is also able to manipulate the idea of motherhood to hold Nnu Ego accountable while absolving himself of all the responsibilities and duties. A similar version of this elevated patriarchy is depicted in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1995) where Okonkwo's towering presence makes the female characters around him invisible. This section directs attention towards the male figure in order to examine the way patriarchal values are constructed leading to patriarchal manipulation and exploitation of women's domestic roles. This section will examine Okonkwo's character in light of his innovative definition of manhood and how the arrival of Christianity, as a time of transition, serves as a threat to this rigid vision, destabilizing his perception of what it means to be a man.

Okonkwo's portrayal in the novel highlights the criteria utilized to judge men in Umuofia. Any man who fails to live up to the defined standards is branded a woman. Through its focus on patriarchal representation of men especially Okonkwo, the female characters in *Things Fall Apart* remain at the periphery while the narrative structures around traditional Ibo masculinity are innovated by Okonkwo. I say innovated because Okonkwo goes above and beyond in developing himself as a patriarchal figure. The novel shows this through his transgressions when he beats his wife and the way he forcibly distances himself from the female gender. While Okonkwo's patriarchal version of manhood is rooted in the

Ibo tradition, he innovates patriarchal traditional values in developing himself as one of a kind. The novel portrays patriarchal traditional values through proverbial expressions and the way characters show their regard for Okonkwo. The role of proverbs is crucial to the structuring of cultural and traditional definitions of genders. The novel presents crucial ideas (such as a cultural identity) through proverbial expressions. This idea is also expressed by scholar Gitanjali Gogoi in a 2017 article titled “A Study on Chinua Achebe’s Use of Proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*” when she comments that “in portraying the pre-colonial Ibos of Umuofia ..., Achebe uses the proverbs, myths and folktales as the depositories of values and customs. He gives expression to the philosophy of the Ibo world through the proverbs and myths” (53). Along with defining customs and traditions, proverbs also play a crucial role in describing gender dynamics in the novel. Describing proverbs as “the palm-oil with which words are eaten”, the novel constructs traditional definition of the male gender through proverbial expressions (2). Emmanuel Obiechina in the article “Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel” (1993) explains that proverbs in Achebe’s novels are intricately linked to the main narrative. In other words, “each narrative proverb is a vital tributary to the main flow of the narrative, or to use a botanical metaphor, a substantial branch on the main stem of the giant tree (126). Proverbs, therefore carry deep meaning and highlight the traditional elements in the Umuofia.

The New Yam Festival was thus an occasion for joy throughout Umuofia. And every man whose arm was strong, as the Ibo people say, was expected to invite large numbers of guests from far and wide. Okonkwo always asked his wives’ relations,

and since he now had three wives his guests would make a fairly big crowd (Achebe 26-27).

The expression “as the Ibo people say” here denotes the traditional values of Umuofia. Proverbial expressions highlight the role of a traditional wealthy man and Okonkwo being an important figure fulfills all proverbial prophesies. In the article “A Comparative Approach of the Portrayal of the Cultural Identity” (2023), Bokotiabato Mokogna Zéphirin et al. highlight the role of proverbs and oral tales in creating cultural identity. Commenting on the proverbial expression mentioned above, the authors suggest that “the story is about a wealthy man and many guests at the moment of the New Yam Festival. Only strong men can have a big crowd with them in their compounds. This can be alluded to Okonkwo, who is rich with farms and wives as portrayed by Achebe” (186). The ability of Okonkwo to invite people from far and wide sides of Umuofia indicates that Okonkwo is a wealthy and strong man and “a huge quantity of food can be cooked by a wealthy man’s wives” (186). Such expressions therefore create a traditional masculine identity and Okonkwo makes sure he fulfills the criteria of manhood.

Apart from being wealthy, Okonkwo’s dominance as a traditional patriarchal figure is also established through a display of his achievements in the novel. Proverbial expressions encapsulate the essence of life in Umuofia, and Okonkwo structures his life in alignment with these proverbs. Highlighting young Okonkwo’s achievements, the novel states: “To crown it all, he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars ... he was already one of the greatest men of his time ... As the elders said, ‘if a child

washed his hands he could eat with kings” (Achebe 6). The traditional proverb here highlights the concept of developing one’s worth. Achievement here denotes that a person can command respect if they are worthy enough. Okonkwo knew that “in the Ibo tradition, a man is judged according to his worth” and through his high achieving tendency Okonkwo made sure that he was a proper man (Zéphirin et al. 187). Okonkwo’s success is evident from the beginning and is also expressed in connection to his personal god: “At the most one could say that his chi or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his chi agreed” (8). Okonkwo’s presence in the traditional Igbo culture in Umuofia is strongly felt. While Nnu Ego remained dependent on her chi to change her circumstances, Okonkwo was a man who dictated his chi to agree with his affairs. This contrast underscores the gendered power dynamics within Igbo society, where men are granted agency and control over their destinies, while women are expected to submit to fate and external forces. In relation to Achebe’s texts and his usage of proverbs, Bernth Lindfors in his book *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* (1973) comments that “by studying the proverbs in a novel, we gain insight into the moral issues with which the actions of characters can be measured and evaluated. Proverbs help us to understand and interpret Achebe’s novels” (92). Through the usage of proverbial expressions, the novel thus presents Okonkwo’s traditional Ibo identity.

While proverbial expressions in the linguistic sphere help in constructing a patriarchal male figure in *Things Fall Apart*, we see a similar construction of the male gender in *The Joys of Motherhood* when it comes to the importance of having male children as per

traditional values. Onyemaechi Udumukwu and I. Chima Igbokwe in their article titled “Language, Polygamy and Motherhood in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*” (2016) talk about the linguistic approach used in the novel that functions towards constructing the themes of polygamy and motherhood. Udumukwu and Igbokwe explains that “the near-total patriarchal domination of females and children is vividly portrayed in the syntactic and lexical manipulation of language which ends up in the emphatic presentation of masculine ideology” (284). As a result, the novel constructs a version of manhood that is desired based on traditional teachings that Nnu Ego followed and a version of femininity that was both unwanted and inferior as opposed to the male gender. Similar to *Things Fall Apart*, *The Joys of Motherhood* also shows the way the male gender is constructed with the notion of superiority. When Adaku is lamenting the death of her son, Oshia, Nnu Ego’s son, reminds her that she still has Dumbi, Adaku’s daughter. To this Adaku remarks “You are worth more than ten Dumbis”, highlighting the meaning of having a boy (166). In the same manner, *Woman at Point Zero* also depicts the importance associated with the male gender. In this novel, male superiority is established through access to education. Firdaus tells the reader that “El Azhar was an awesome world peopled only by men, and my uncle was one of them, was a man” (27).

In being a traditional man Okonkwo became the epitome of perfection against whom other beings (male or female) were seen. The construction of Okonkwo’s patriarchal figure, therefore, was dependent mainly on the traditional definition of genders in Umuofia. Commenting on the gender dynamics in Achebe’s novel, Christopher Anyokwu in his 2011

article titled “Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe's ‘Things Fall Apart’” explains that in the traditional system “being *male* connotes masculinity, manliness, valour, courage, animal force of will and raw physical strength [whereas] being *female* [means ...] mothering protectiveness and accommodation, affection and pacifism, love and domesticity” (18). Through proverbial expressions, the novel amplifies Okonkwo’s male figure and presents him as a representative of the Ibo tradition.

It is interesting to note here that the construction of the male gender through proverbs applies to all men in Umuofia. Proverbs present the idea of a man’s worth through strength, wealth, and titles. While there were other successful men in Umuofia such as Nwakibie “who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children” and “the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan”, Okonkwo stands out because of his staunch adherence to *traditional patriarchal construction of gender* (5). Mehmet Recep Tas in his article “The Dilemma of Preserving or Progressing in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” (2023) highlights the profound connection between characters and traditions in the novel. Tas explains that “the main characters in *Things Fall Apart* are introduced with distinct personas that reflect their initial strong attachments to traditional values within the Igbo society. The protagonist, Okonkwo, embodies the epitome of adhering to traditional values” (304). Although Tas is right in pointing out Okonkwo’s inclination towards traditional values, I suggest that it is *patriarchal* traditional values that Okonkwo feels greatly attached to since he is accustomed to ignoring other traditional aspects that do not serve his masculine and patriarchal ideology, for example, beating his wife during the sacred Week of Peace.

Although the traditional construction of gender through proverbial expressions is one way through which the male is defined, Okonkwo innovates these traditional concepts and creates his version of patriarchy in which aversion to anything feminine dominates. Through his constant rejection of the feminine, Okonkwo constructs his idea of manhood. Anthony Njoku in his article “Achebe’s Receding Male Chauvinism” (2016) sheds light on a similar idea while examining Okonkwo’s masculinity. Njoku comments that “masculinity comprises odious hatred for, terrible fear and brutal rejection of all [...] feminine traits besides strong penchant for bravery ...—all which are rallied in one man, one character, Okonkwo, an embodiment of bustling manhood” (36). As opposed to this, in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Woman at Point Zero*, we see that the female figures are relied upon and needed by the male figures allowing for the patriarchal manipulation and exploitation of religion and tradition to function. Nnu Ego is an exploited mother because Nnaife actively puts her in a position that warrants sacrifice while he does not behave like a man per traditional standards. On the other hand, Firdaus’ uncle needs her for the dowry she will bring. Firdaus’ father also knew “how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time” (14). In the case of these men, women were needed for patriarchal control to function whereas Okonkwo constructed his version of manhood by completely eliminating the other gender and developing a dislike for weaker males, and in doing so he presents his ways as traditional Umuofian standards. He does not depend on women to sustain his position as a patriarch. He actively rejects anything feminine. This can be explained through the cultivation of crops in the novel. The aspect of cultivation holds great importance in Ibo tradition since men are judged based on their produce and their masculinity compliments their position in the clan.

Okonkwo is described as a man who “had a large barn full of yams and he has three wives” (5). While teaching his son, Nwoye and Ikemefuna the cultivation of yam, Okonkwo thunders: “‘If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw’ . . . *Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed.* Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man” (emphasis mine 10). The quotation shows the connection between yam cultivation and manliness that encapsulates the traditional Umuofian conception of masculinity, wherein the ability to provide for one's family through farming is a symbol of strength and societal status. However, Okonkwo's insistence on imparting the skill of yam cultivation to his son, Nwoye, and to Ikemefuna signifies more than the transmission of a culturally valued practice. It reflects his attempt to innovate the patriarchal norms of society by intensifying their application. While yam cultivation is a core element of Umuofian masculinity, Okonkwo's approach to teaching it reveals a desire to impose an even stricter and more rigid standard of manhood. In this way, Okonkwo's actions extend beyond mere adherence to tradition, as he seeks to redefine the expectations of manliness in a manner that aligns with his personal vision of patriarchal strength. Thus, his efforts to instill these skills in his son underscore his broader endeavor to assert control over the cultural construction of masculinity, pushing it to an extreme that goes beyond what is required by the community.

The fact that yam denoted manliness is a Umuofian concept of associating manliness with a major crop. On the one hand, seen as a stand-in for manliness in Ibo tradition, yam is presented as an important crop in the novel. O. Udumukwu in the chapter titled “The Niger

Bridge or Reconfiguring the Post-colonial Nation in *Anthills of the Savannah*” (2007) sheds light on this idea with the following analysis:

Yam functions as a sign of transforming an axiological entity, which accounts for its significance in the social system of a culture. Thus, yam is used in the novel as a trope for personal power and strength. As such, we are told that the strength of a man’s hand is measured by the size of his barn and yam is described as “the king of the crops”, and a man’s crop (66).

Being regarded as the “king of crops”, yam holds an important place in terms of the economy and Okonkwo, being the producer of this crop, presents his idea of manhood. On the other hand, Okonkwo’s insistence on his son being a great man results from his son’s lack of manliness according to Okonkwo’s standards. In comparing himself to his son, Okonkwo presents *his* definition of being a man: one in which the man needs to start early and aim for great titles to prove himself. By focusing on making his son learn early Okonkwo does not simply expect Nwoye to be a man, rather he wants Nwoye to be the kind of man Okonkwo is.

Throughout Nwoye’s early years, Okonkwo tries to kill his effeminate (according to Okonkwo’s patriarchal standard) spirit since Okonkwo innovates his definition of manhood based on his strict principles coupled with the traditional belief system. Because Nwoye preferred his mother’s stories Okonkwo sees him as an effeminate man and a failure.

Discussing the kind of stories that are “considered sacred, and of high esoteric value”, literary scholars Kalu Wosu and Jane Nnamdi (2019) in their article “Rescuing the Woman from the Achebean Periphery” explain that “these tales are exclusively told by men and are

reserved for those men who are initiates of certain cults or associations. These tales, whether they are profane or sacred are patriarchal constructs” (144). The stories told by men “are intended to further the interest of patriarchy” (144). As a result, these tales construct and develop “male dominance [that] is transmitted from one generation to another. In *Things Fall Apart*, we find Okonkwo telling manly stories of war and violence” (144). While the telling of manly stories can be seen as a part of Ibo tradition, forcing these stories on his son was Okonkwo’s version of manhood. Okonkwo’s tales were patriarchal whereas Nwoye wanted to hear “stories of the tortoise and his wily ways” – the kind his mother always told” (Achebe 43). Analyzing the traits Igbo culture, Smarika Pareek (2022) highlights that “in Igbo culture male-centered stories were highly patriarchal and more respected than female stories” (6103). Unlike Okonkwo, Nwoye wanted to be in touch with his feminine side. Resultantly, “he [Nwoye] refuses Okonkwo's interpellative call to be a ‘man’ contemptuous of ‘female’ attributes” as stated by Biodun Jeyifo in his 1993 article “Okonkwo and His Mother” (852).

Okonkwo’s construction of a strict patriarchal manhood results from his aversion to anything feminine originating from his hatred towards his father and leading to his violent interactions with his wives. A major part of Okonkwo’s fear of failure results from even a minute resemblance to his father who, as per Okonkwo’s patriarchal standards, was a failure, since in the case of Okonkwo, “effeminacy is hunted beyond the woman’s sphere of existence and determinedly traced to any man who exhibits a modicum of tender emotion. A man who has soft heart is a hidden and ugly enemy” (Njoku 35). The novel depicts this through Okonkwo’s understanding of the term agbala: “how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know

that agbala was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title” (Achebe 13). This highlights the importance of titles and the aversion to femaleness in Okonkwo’s life. The word agbala denotes two things: one, the embodiment of god, and the second, a man without titles. As god’s embodiment, Agbala is worshipped and can silence mighty Okonkwo: “The priestess suddenly screamed. ‘Beware, Okonkwo!’ she warned. ‘Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!’” (72). Agbala’s frightening presence has long reigned over Umuofia. While on the one hand, Agbala was a priestess, on the other hand, Okonkwo’s father was also referred to as “agbala” depicting his reduced status from manliness. Christopher Anyokwu (2011) explains that “Unoka is derogatorily referred to as ‘*agbala*’ that is, a woman” exhibiting “moral weaknesses such as gossiping, cantankerousness, laziness, talkativeness, treacherousness, inconstancy, feeble-mindedness, fearfulness, and timorousness, and unreliability” (21-22). It is interesting to note here that despite the dual meaning, Okonkwo only associates a failed man with the term agbala, developing his version of patriarchal manhood as opposed to the Ibo tradition that also encapsulated Agbala - the goddess - within the term completely ignoring the female aspect of the word. Discussing the poet Nana Asmā’u, Chukwuma Azuonye in the article “Feminist or Simply Feminine?” (2006) examines the reason behind Okonkwo’s failure.

Why does the hero Okonkwo fail in the end? He fails because of his complete misunderstanding of the gender balance in his own culture, as manifested in his use of “feminine” epithets or the word “woman” as a convenient metaphor for everything he

considers weak, foolish, unacceptable, or a recipe for failure . . . Acting on his superficial and literal understanding that femininity or feminine things can be equated with failure, because of the application of the odium agbala to his failed, ne'er-do-well father (65).

The quotation presents Okonkwo's major flaw which is his faulty perception of masculine and feminine in his culture. Okonkwo seems to be blinded to the gender dynamics by his version of manhood. As a result, he associates 'woman' and 'feminine' with undesirable traits that do not measure up to his definition of manhood. According to Anthony Njoku (2016), in Okonkwo's world, "effeminacy is derided, dreaded and eliminated" (35).

Okonkwo, therefore, sees himself as the representative of 'man', and for him, the idea of 'woman' represents failure and/or weakness. In this case, the term 'woman' does not limit itself to the marginalized female figures for Okonkwo but also refers to men who do not fit his definition of manhood. Okonkwo's construction of manhood therefore not only marginalizes and oppresses the female figure but also the male who is in touch with his feminine side. It is one of the reasons that Okonkwo loathed his father who failed at being a man according to Okonkwo's definition. Okonkwo's father, "Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer. . ." (4). Moreover, "he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow" (3-4). As per Okonkwo's patriarchal standards, Unoka is regarded as a woman. Kalu Wosu and Jane Nnamdi (2019) comments that in Umuofia "not only are women considered inferior to men, but also used as qualifiers for

weak and unsuccessful men, especially those men who have taken no titles. A case in point is Unoka, Okonkwo's father. He had taken no titles in his life time, and so was considered a woman" (142). Being branded a woman, Unoka died a failure and was buried in the Evil Forest.

Okonkwo's version of patriarchy not only marginalized men like Unoka but also humiliated men without titles. During one of the tribal meetings Okonkwo targets a man with no titles: "'This meeting is for men.' The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit" (Achebe 8). As per Okonkwo's standards, although women such as Nnu Ego and Firdaus would have been at the periphery, men like Nnaife and Firdaus' father would also be seen as 'women' – a fall from their elevated status as men. In contrast to Okonkwo, Nnaife barely focused on feeding his family. When he was asked for more money for food, he refused by saying "'I am not adding a penny to that money,' he said adamantly. 'You can starve, for all I care'" (Emecheta 177). On the other hand, Firdaus' father was also a lazy man. Food in the house was reserved for him and his children often went to bed hungry. Firdaus describes these details when she narrates the following: "My father never went to bed without supper ... Sometimes when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs ... My mother would hide his food from us ... He would sit eating alone while we watched him" (El Saadawi 23). In contrast to this, Okonkwo's family was well fed and his "prosperity was visible in his household" (Achebe 4). I suggest that all the male figures described here functioned based on their version of patriarchy. While Nnaife and Firdaus' father believed in

placing themselves before everyone else depending on their women to make their superiority possible, looking after his family's needs was a part of Okonkwo's construct of manhood since he believed in ruling "his household with a heavy hand" (Achebe 4).

While Okonkwo's hatred towards anything feminine (such as his father) partly constructs his patriarchal version of manhood, Okonkwo solidifies his masculine definition through his treatment of his wives. The marginalization of Okonkwo's wives and their lack of voice manifests itself through Okonkwo's household. Okonkwo, being the decision-maker in the family, possesses authority over his family's intimate, social, and religious matters. This is reflected through the structure of Okonkwo's house where "his own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed half a moon behind the obi" centralizing Okonkwo's presence (4). By othering his women in the household and eliminating women's voices, Okonkwo established his male authority. When one of his wives questioned about the boy, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo thundered, "Do what you are told, woman . . . When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?" (Achebe 4). Keeping his wives silent was Okonkwo's way of being the man of the house. Anene Ejikeme in a 2017 article titled "The Women of *Things Fall Apart*, Speaking from a Different Perspective: Chimamanda Adichie's Headstrong Storytellers", comments that "in *Things Fall Apart* the women are peripheral and because most of the women do not say much, it is easy to cast them as subordinated, or even oppressed" (319). Facilitated by the traditional ways, Okonkwo possessed the ability to silence female voices and keep his hold strong over his household.

While the traditional structure of Umuofia supported Okonkwo's adherence to patriarchal values, his version of manhood surpassed these norms, presenting an exaggerated form of masculinity. This is evident in his disregard for customs that prohibit wife-beating, as he simultaneously reinforced his sense of manhood by invoking other customary practices to assert his dominance. In this way, Okonkwo's actions highlight his selective manipulation of tradition, adhering to some customs while violating others, to construct an idealized version of masculinity that extends beyond the community's expectations. During the Week of Peace, Umuofia was in the spirit of celebration. Okonkwo, however, behaves differently during the sacred week of peace and disrupts the divine atmosphere because of his anger.

Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at the friend's house and did not return early to cook the afternoon meal. . . And when she returned he beat her heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess (Achebe 8-9).

The beating not only portrays Okonkwo's patriarchal figure but also depicts his disregard for the traditional Ibo customs that intended to protect women. Like Okonkwo, we see a similar disregard for religious traditions by Sheikh Mahmoud when he beats Firdaus and Nnaife's justifiable anger when he beats Adaku. Sheikh Mahmoud is described as "a virtuous man" who "got into the habit of beating me [Firdaus] whether he had a reason for it or not" (48, 58). Being a man of religion, by beating Firdaus, Sheikh Mahmoud showed complete

ignorance of the teachings of his religion. Firdaus like Ojiugo silently took his beatings. With the episode of the Week of Peace Okonkwo centralizes his manly attributes whereas the one who is beaten remains a silent figure. Ojiugo – Okonkwo’s third wife and the beaten woman – becomes a victim of Okonkwo’s *justifiable anger* despite the protection provided by the sacred week. There is a subtle critique and irony embedded within the narrative. The narrator describes Okonkwo’s anger as "justifiable," yet the events leading up to it—his youngest wife going to plait her hair and being late to cook—seem trivial in comparison to his violent response. The choice to label his anger as “justifiable” subtly undercuts Okonkwo’s harshness, highlighting the disproportionate nature of his reaction. The irony lies in the fact that his rage is justified by what seems like a minor, everyday incident, which casts doubt on the validity of his patriarchal notions of control and dominance. The narrative voice here reflects the complexity of Okonkwo’s character and the larger critique of rigid masculine ideals within the novel. By defying religious norms, Okonkwo reasserts his authority in his household while reminding Ojiugo of her role as a woman. Through this interaction presents himself as the man “at the centre of the Igbo universe” while making the woman “invisible and voiceless” (Wosu and Nnamdi 144). Highlighting Okonkwo’s patriarchal reading of gender norms in Ibo, Joseph M. Brogdon (2012) in the article “Reverential Feminism” explains that “not only is Okonkwo at odds with Achebe in his treatment of women, but also with the very social foundations of his own beloved traditional culture” (86). Moreover “Okonkwo conditions himself from childhood to irreverently despise all things feminine, allowing himself in turn to subconsciously hate and seek dominance over women” (86). This hatred towards all things feminine is depicted in his behaviour towards his wives and his

perception of them as subordinate individuals allowing him to push them further towards the periphery.

While Nwoye associates himself with his mother's stories and is branded a female, Okonkwo distances himself from such stories to retain his image of manhood while constantly pushing the feminine away. Due to his patriarchal approach, he eliminates the memory of his own mother while remembering his father as a man Okonkwo would not want to be. Biodun Jeyifo in the article "Okonkwo and His Mother" (1993) explains "Okonkwo's memory of his mother's stories in his childhood is very easily suppressed; and it is easily consigned to the domain of 'silly women's stories'" (849). Jeyifo explains that throughout the novel Okonkwo's relationship with his father and son remains dominant as opposed to his relationship with his wives and daughters (849). The suppression of memory connected to women highlights Okonkwo's aversion to the feminine. Women's stories and their presence remain at the periphery because of Okonkwo's association of the female with failure. Developing his version of manhood Okonkwo keeps the women in his life at the periphery and after death, they are pushed further into the unconscious. Okonkwo's suppression of his mother's memory is similar to the Firdaus' death sentence. Firdaus realized that men would not want her to live after seeing her capability as a fearless and free woman. She needed to be tamed and silenced. Okonkwo's suppression of his mother's memory plays a similar role.

Okonkwo's repression of motherlore ... and the significations embedded in his mother's tale of the Ear and the Mosquito would seem to support this thesis of deep-rooted male insecurity about and fear of female power and creativity, with the

corresponding need or will to tame it, domesticate it, marginalize it, and project it as the gift and vocation of a few “exceptional” women who are thus, like Chielo in *Things Fall Apart*, “honorary men” (Jeyifo 854).

Okonkwo, therefore, is like the men Firdaus talks about. He is the epitome of patriarchal oppression and keeps women within bounds due to his insecurities. Okonkwo fears women like Firdaus who are capable of unmasking men and their façade of patriarchal power. He keeps his women under control and denies them agency so that they are never equipped to retaliate against him. In a 1980 essay, “Achebe and His Women,” Merun Nasser expresses that Achebe’s work gives “the impression that the role of the African woman is barely above that of ‘chattel’” (22). The female figures in the novel were merely Okonkwo’s appendages while Okonkwo constructed his narrative of manhood.

With the narrative of Okonkwo’s patriarchy in the background, the arrival of Christianity was a threat to Okonkwo’s manliness disrupting his perception of being a man. Frank Salamone in his article “The Depiction of Masculinity in Classic Nigerian Literature” (2006) says that “Achebe, moreover, depicts the Church as diluting the masculinity of the Ibo through their imposing English on them, thus easing them into a loss of their own language on proverbs” (204). The proverbs upon which Okonkwo built his innovative patriarchy were rendered useless. Christianity’s arrival creates a mini-narrative by disrupting the established Umuofian culture, which is central to Okonkwo’s definition of manhood. As Christianity introduces new traditions and values, it challenges the patriarchal structures that Okonkwo upholds, puncturing the cultural fabric of Umuofia. This shift in tradition fosters a mini-narrative, as those who convert begin to forge new identities that diverge from the

community's traditional norms, further undermining Okonkwo's authority and the patriarchal system he seeks to preserve. Seen from Okonkwo's lens the converts were considered unwanted and effeminate. Among these converts was Nwoye and this conversion pushed him further away from his patriarchal father while creating his own identity. The Christian missionary, Mr. Brown, "had just sent Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuuru" (Achebe 59). Nwoye left his father's place and "never returned . . . But he was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith" (50). Converting to Christianity, leaving home, and deciding to get his siblings later were the first few decisions Nwoye took for himself creating his mini-narrative away from his father's patriarchal narrative. Muhammad Shadab Ilyas in his article "Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Study from a Feminist Perspective" (2024) suggests that Nwoye's decision to embrace Christianity shows "a rejection of his father's authority and the patriarchal values he represents" and in doing so, he creates his own definition of being a man rather than assimilating into his father's unforgiving world (12).

While Christianity allows space men like Nwoye, in case of women it can be seen as an example of competing patriarchies. In both *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Things Fall Apart*, female characters are caught in the crossfire of competing patriarchies – traditional and colonial – that overlap and replace one another while continuing to oppress women. These novels reveal how colonialism does not dismantle indigenous patriarchal systems but rather supplants them with new forms of male-dominated control, leaving women suspended between two systems that equally marginalize them. In *Things Fall Apart*, the arrival of

colonial rule disrupts the existing social order, but instead of offering women greater freedom, the new structure also shows the possibility of entrenching women's subordination under the guise of legal and religious authority. Similarly, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, colonial Lagos redefines gender roles and economic structures, stripping women like Nnu Ego of the communal support systems that once gave their roles as mothers meaning. She is left navigating both the demands of traditional motherhood and the harsh realities of an urban, colonial economy that offers her no recognition or relief. In both texts, patriarchal authority shifts hands – from father to colonizer – but its essential nature remains intact. Women are thus not liberated by the transition from one system to another; they are merely repositioned within a continuous structure of gendered oppression. Nwoye's case, however, differs in that he benefits from the privileges afforded to him as a male.

Nwoye's diversion from the norm mirrors Adaku's dissent from tradition. Both Nwoye and Adaku were trying to assimilate into a world they did not belong in. Okonkwo's patriarchal world did not leave space for Nwoye to flourish, and in the same manner, the patriarchal world resided by Nnu Ego pushed Adaku to the periphery since she had no sons. Adaku was an abject figure (in the Kristevan sense) and this is evidenced when Nwakusor addresses Adaku as "the daughter of whoever you are" reiterating the fact that a woman with no sons had no identity (Emecheta 166). Nwoye, too, was seen as an outcast by his father, Okonkwo. Nwoye's feminine spirit and his preference for his mother's stories collectively pushed him farther away from Okonkwo's world leading to his subsequent conversion. When Nnaife learns of Adaku's departure "he dismis[s] Adaku as an evil woman" and when Okonkwo learns of his son's conversion, at first, he feels like wreaking havoc but later "he

told himself that Nwoye was not fighting for” (Emecheta 240, Achebe 50). In both cases, the patriarchs easily dismiss the transgressors as people unwanted conveying the idea that their departure means nothing. In their patriarchal world, both Okonkwo and Nnaife console themselves with the knowledge that people who do not conform to their world are not worth fighting for.

In terms of challenging Okonkwo’s patriarchal narrative of manhood and creating a mini-narrative presenting Okonkwo’s tender and feminine side, Okonkwo’s second wife Ekwefi and her daughter Ezinma play crucial roles respectively. In Okonkwo’s cruel and harsh patriarchal world, the novel presents his wife Ekwefi’s fiery spirit. Ekwefi is introduced as the woman who did not marry Okonkwo earlier as “he was too poor to pay her bride-price. But a few years later *she ran away from her husband* and came to live with Okonkwo” (Achebe 12). By running away, Ekwefi not only defies traditional norms but also challenges patriarchal viewpoints in pursuing her love for Okonkwo. Ekwefi was an admirer of wrestling and Okonkwo being a great wrestler found a place in Ekwefi’s heart. Maria Lowe in her article “Transcending Roles of Women and Privileged Motherhood In Achebe’s Things Fall Apart” (2021) talks about complex female roles in Achebe’s texts. Referring to Ekwefi’s ability to go against the norms, Lowe suggests that by leaving her husband and coming to Okonkwo Ekwefi shows “ownership of her future and body, where she has full sovereignty of who she will share them with. It also points to the possibility of Ekwefi leaving Okonkwo if she desired” (9). As opposed to Okonkwo’s conventional and rigid manhood, the novel portrays Ekwefi’s defiance poking holes in the pervasive masculine

narrative. Ekwefi's ability to challenge Okonkwo as a patriarchal figure depicts her disregard for Okonkwo's innovative masculinity. The following incident depicts this:

. . . although Okonkwo was a great man whose prowess was universally acknowledged, he was not a hunter. In fact he had not killed a rat with his gun. And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot (11).

The wife whose murmuring provoked Okonkwo's anger was Ekwefi. Ekwefi's subtle comment hit Okonkwo's version of manhood like a bullet. It was the latent truth that stung Okonkwo. By bringing attention to "guns that never shot", Ekwefi challenges Okonkwo's outward façade of masculinity and hints at weakness. Her act of defiance, immediately after being beaten by Okonkwo for cutting banana leaves highlights the way she challenges Okonkwo's authority and masculinity. Critic Ousseynou B. Traoré in his chapter "Why the Snake-Lizard Killed his Mother" (1997) highlights that banana tree leaves were seen as "a figure of his [Okonkwo's] manhood" and "Ekwefi actually strips Okonkwo of his male pride or manhood, as she strips the old banana of few leaves" (57, 58). In doing so, Ekwefi not only shows agency but also the ability to challenge mighty Okonkwo.

While Okonkwo fails at being Nwoye's father, Ekwefi presents a unique relationship with her daughter presenting a mini-narrative depicting love and care amidst Okonkwo's strict patriarchal world. For Ekwefi, her daughter Ezinma, is the most important person in her life. Born after the death of nine children, Ezinma was the one who stayed, and Ekwefi gave all in looking after Ezinma and cherishing her like a treasure. Her love for her daughter

surpassed her fear for Okonkwo creating a mini-narrative that prioritized her bond with her daughter over cultural and patriarchal norms. This is evident when Ezinma is carried off into the forest by Chielo – the chief priestess. Without thinking Ekwefi decides to follow her to ensure her daughter’s safety. When Okonkwo asks, “‘Where are you going?’ ‘I am following Chielo,’ she replied and disappeared in the darkness” without waiting for Okonkwo’s reply – the man who is in the habit of beating his wives on minor transgressions (34). Although this episode highlights Ekwefi’s fiery spirit, it also highlights Okonkwo’s understanding of Ekwefi’s love for her daughter. By not detaining her, Okonkwo acknowledges her motherly feelings and allows her to seek maternal peace by being in close proximity to Chielo.

Ezinma and Ekwefi’s relationship, though briefly described in the novel, becomes a dominant feature of the story because of its odd female presence in Okonkwo’s otherwise clearly defined masculine world. While Okonkwo’s life depended on differentiating himself from his father and making his son like himself, Ezinma dissolves such strict boundaries between relations. Maria Lowe (2021) reiterates this idea when she says that “while Ekwefi does command Ezinma in her assigned duties, like serving food to her father, Ekwefi does not view Ezinma with the lack of respect that Nwoye is shown by Okonkwo ... Ezinma ... enriches her [mother’s] life and companionship” (12). Calling her mother by her name, Ezinma presents a relation of equality: “Ezinma did not call her mother Nne like all children. She called her by her name ... There was something in it like the companionship of equals, which was strengthened by such little conspiracies as eating eggs in the bedroom” (25). The passage depicts Ezinma’s approach towards her mother and the bond they share. Their ‘little

conspiracies' highlight the intimate bond they share, unlike Okonkwo's relationship with his son Nwoye. Linda Strong-Leek in her article "Reading as a Woman" (2001) explains that "in her relationship with her mother, Ezinma exhibits what Okonkwo, through his phallogocentric lens, perceives as masculine tendencies" (32). Resultantly we see that "this maternal connection becomes a caveat for Okonkwo and traditional society because he cannot control the depths of love and the shared enthusiasm between mother and daughter" (33). In doing so, the mother-daughter relationship creates an alternate narrative challenging Okonkwo's rigid boundary between relations that do not allow space for love. Because of their 'shared enthusiasm', Ekwefi and Ezinma can go against Okonkwo together despite the risk of being beaten.

Ekwefi even gave her such delicacies as eggs, which children were rarely allowed to eat because such food tempted them to steal. One day as Ezinma was eating an egg Okonkwo had come in unexpectedly from his hut. He was greatly shocked and swore to beat Ekwefi if she dared to give the child eggs again. But it was impossible to refuse Ezinma anything. *After her father's rebuke she developed an even keener appetite for eggs.* And she enjoyed above all the secrecy in which she now ate them (emphasis mine 25).

Despite Okonkwo's threat of beating Ekwefi, both mother and daughter remain engaged in a secret resistance to Okonkwo's patriarchal norms. The secrecy allows them to create a private space where they assert their agency in Okonkwo's visibly oppressive household. While motherhood became oppressive for Nnu Ego, for Ekwefi it became a source of

companionship. Motherhood made Nnu Ego believe “that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children” and her back-breaking responsibilities never allowed her to develop a bond with her children (Emecheta 179).

Though Ekwefi’s mini-narrative challenges Okonkwo’s patriarchal disposition, Ezinma’s mini-narrative presents the tender side of Okonkwo who knows love, care, and admiration for his daughter. In contrast to this, Adaku’s and Firdaus’ mini-narratives were those of subverting the patriarchal norms allowing these women to create their own space. Ezinma, however, creates a narrative within her father’s patriarchal world. Aron Aji and Kirstin Lynne Ellsworth in the article “Ezinma: The ‘Ogbanje’ Child in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” (1993) assert that in the form of Ezinma “Achebe offers ... a counterpoint to the traditionally nearsighted masculine value system of Okonkwo” (171). Ezinma disrupts Okonkwo’s masculinity through her presence and makes him forget his definition of manhood. It is their relationship [that] involves strong natural parent-child ties that bring out his emotional, ‘feminine’ side” (172). Okonkwo’s admiration for Ezinma is depicted through his constant desire for her to be a boy. When Okonkwo comes back after killing Ikemefuna, he feels genuinely depressed since he has grown fond of Ikemefuna’s presence. After he comes home, he only allows Ezinma to come to his hut and listens to her rebukes:

“You have not eaten for two days,” said his daughter Ezinma when she brought the food to him. “So you must finish this.” She sat down and stretched her legs in front of her. Okonkwo ate the food absent mindedly. ‘She should have been a boy,’ he

thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter. He passed her a piece of fish (Achebe 21).

Ezinma's presence allows Okonkwo to be vulnerable. He depicts emotions in Ezinma's company that he would otherwise suppress. Looking at her with affection and thinking about her as someone who possesses desirable qualities, Okonkwo allows himself to develop tender emotions. Ezinma's presence allows the creation of a mini-narrative that highlights Okonkwo's internal self where he sometimes comes to terms with his feminine side. Aji and Ellsworth claim that "if Ezinma is a source of comfort for Okonkwo throughout his troubled life, it is because she subdues his manhood, balancing the masculine and the feminine attributes to make him a full person" (Ellsworth and Aji 173). Ezinma becomes Okonkwo's source of comfort because she challenges and pacifies his masculine side while allowing him to embrace a calmer feminine side. The novel represents this when Ezinma is taken by Chielo:

Okonkwo was also feeling tired, and sleepy, for although *nobody else knew it*, he had not slept at all last night. He had felt very anxious but *did not show it*. When Ekwefi had followed the priestess, he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and manly interval to pass and then gone with his machete to the shrine, where he thought they must be ... It was only on his fourth trip that he had found Ekwefi, and *by then he had become gravely worried* (emphasis mine 37).

The passage highlights Okonkwo's feminine side that embraces emotion as opposed to his strict masculine side that keeps emotions at bay. By timing himself appropriately before

following Ekwefi, Okonkwo tries to maintain his manly image. The scene also portrays Okonkwo as Ezinma's father rather than a traditional and patriarchal Ibo man. For Ezinma "the normally stoic Okonkwo will do things he would never do for anyone else. Only Ezinma can awaken Okonkwo's suppressed qualities. On account of her, he is tender, nurturing, and submissive" (Ellsworth and Aji 173). Ezinma's presence, therefore, creates a mini-narrative that evokes Okonkwo's tender and feminine side while disrupting his masculinity briefly.

Unlike previous novels, the analysis in this section has focused on the male character and his innovative patriarchy. By relying on proverbial beliefs and developing an aversion to the 'feminine', Okonkwo creates his version of manhood that eliminates all that fail to live up to his standards including his father and son. However, the female figures in the novel puncture Okonkwo's patriarchal narrative and create their mini-narrative that depicts a different version of Okonkwo along with establishing their own relationships. While Okonkwo dominates the narrative and his "wives seem to have no avenues of redress, completely at the mercy of their violent husband", the mini-narratives portray him as a father and a challenged husband (Ejikeme 320).

The analysis in this chapter focuses on patriarchy in relation to motherhood, marriage, and the innovative concept of manhood. This chapter concludes that patriarchy, as a system of control and oppression, deeply shaped the lives of women by evolving into various forms of dominance, each tailored to the different roles women occupy throughout their lives. As a system that constantly evolves and adapts, patriarchal dominance over women constantly manipulates the roles women are bound to play as daughters, wives, mothers, etc. By

analyzing *Woman at Point Zero*, *Things Fall Apart* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, this chapter examined different means through which patriarchy is implemented in women's lives. Nnu Ego suffers because of the patriarchal institutional of motherhood that allows her husband to implement traditional Ibo norms in urban Lagos forcing Nnu Ego to be traditional and/or modern depending on Nnaife's preference. On the other hand, Firdaus becomes a victim of a patriarchal religion that manipulates religious traditions to marginalize women like Firdaus. Since Firdaus performed her role as a wife, patriarchal men like her uncle and her husband leave her beaten and humiliated justifying their acts with religion. In *Things Fall Apart*, the analysis shifts towards the male character focusing on his definition of masculinity that is innovated based on Ibo traditions and Okonkwo's perception of the feminine. Through the analysis of this book, the chapter highlights underlying reasons that pave the way for women's exploitation suggesting that it is men like Okonkwo with their distorted version of masculinity that end up behaving as Nnaife (Nnu Ego's husband) and Sheikh Mahmoud (Firdaus husband). While patriarchy evolved its forms of control, women's resistance and development of mini-narratives also adjusted itself to patriarchal dominance. The presence of mini-narratives in these texts highlights women's resistance and their agency despite the risks of further marginalization. While some forms of mini-narratives create space for women, other forms portray the feminine side of men through the assistance of female characters. This interplay between patriarchal oppression and women's resistance highlights the durability and structures of control that constantly need to be challenged by women.

Chapter 3: From Fiction to Headlines: Patriarchy and Resistance in Contemporary

Media

The ideas explored in the previous chapters traced hidden patriarchal structures that established control over women through the exploitation of religion and the manipulation of traditional roles of women to marginalize and subjugate them. By exploring the role of patriarchy, the themes covered in the previous chapters depicted the evolving nature of patriarchal forms of control and their ability to adapt. We saw that while Nnu Ego's tradition was rendered useless in urban Lagos, Nnaife managed to manipulate her role as a traditional wife, subjugating and burdening her, while he functioned as a patriarch. In addition to this, the previous chapters portrayed the manipulation and exploitation of religion that allowed men to hide patriarchal power and control. Partition paved the way for using the female body as an object that carried patriarchal honour concealed behind the façade of religion. The chapters suggested that the female victim was created by the male perpetrator by hiding patriarchal control through the manipulation and exploitation of religion and tradition. This analysis was achieved with a particular focus on how patriarchal narratives were applied to regulate women's power and sexuality including on matters of rape, honour killing, marriage, and sex work (or prostitution). The analysis also included women's agency and voice highlighting women's efforts in responding to different forms of marginalization and control. This dissertation argues that patriarchal religion and patriarchal exploitation of tradition have been used as a source of power and authority for subjugating, marginalizing, and othering women. At the same time, women have continually worked to carve out space for themselves

– whether through direct resistance, disrupting patriarchal narratives, or more subtle acts of agency that emerge through the examination of narration and can be examined using standpoint and intersectional theories.

This chapter aims to build on the themes explored previously while extending these ideas into the contemporary period through the analysis of global news media that have been published in the last few years as primary sources to trace the evolving nature of patriarchy and its hold on women today. The purpose of this chapter is to trace shifts in patriarchal control over women and the innovative ways women choose to create their third space and/or mini-narratives. While the partition and the manipulation of women's traditional roles are often viewed as historical events, this chapter argues that because of its ability to adapt, patriarchy has created newer forms of control while continuing to treat women's status as a pawn. Since the focus is on the evolving nature of patriarchal control and women's resistance, this chapter situates the debate in the current times to seek answers to the following questions: How does the discourse reflecting current social trajectories regarding gender reinforcing the marginalization and subjugation of women? How do women attempt to create a third space while dealing with the present-day version of patriarchy? By third space, I refer to the position developed by women as a result of dealing with the challenges raised by patriarchal control over women and their constant marginalization. I suggest that in these third spaces, women develop their mini-narratives. Mini-narratives here refer to the alternate story presented by women who were either remarginalized or controlled based on patriarchal norms. Through their mini-narratives, women challenge and disrupt the

patriarchal discourse regarding women's bodies through the manipulation and exploitation of religion and tradition. Women's mini-narratives follow a distinct structure that reflects their understanding of patriarchal control, the impact of patriarchally defined religion and tradition on their bodies, and ultimately their journey toward confronting and rejecting patriarchal narratives. The focus on women's response to patriarchal control is explored by focusing on present-day means of creating agency and voice through social media. Although the previous chapters focused on literature and used literary methods of analysis, this chapter directs attention toward media sources. By focusing on news media and social media the chapter suggests that these media sources are prime sites for contemporary debates about political/cultural issues that are symbolized through, and impact, Muslim women. Therefore, the chapter focuses on online news articles as its primary source of information to gain insight into patriarchy and its evolving nature while tracing women's third space and the production of mini-narratives.

The chapter begins by focusing on the theme of widow immolation, honour killing, and female genital mutilation (FGM) and tracing the prevalence of these practices in the 21st century to trace the role of patriarchy in the sustenance of these practices and the change in narratives that justifies their growth or decline. The chapter also aims to examine the women's resistance in countering the marginalization resulting from the union of patriarchy, religion, and politics. The chapter focuses on online news articles and popular articles from India, Pakistan, and Britain for recent reports regarding widow immolation, honour killing, and female genital mutilation.

To address contemporary instances of widow immolation, the draws on popular research generated by an online digital organisation called “Feminism in India” (FII). Politically, the organisation aims to dismantle “patriarchy and social injustice by centering the voices of those that these structures oppress” (FII). Being an online digital source, FII documents and records “the representation of Indian women and marginalised communities on the internet” and because of this, it serves as an ideal source for analyzing the intersection of patriarchy, gender, and religion/tradition. FII advocates for feminism that is accessible to women from an Indian perspective – that is, one rooted in local contexts, languages, and lived realities rather than being shaped solely by Western feminist frameworks. Founded by Japleen Pasricha, a woman with a German studies background, FII's main aim was to provide free access to feminist discourse in India.

Along with this, the discussion sources contemporary news reports regarding widow immolation from *The Times of India* that help in analyzing present-day patriarchal trends. In the case of honour killing, the chapter relies on various news media sources such as *The Friday Times* (Pakistan-based online news media), BBC (British news agency), Al Jazeera (an independent news organisation), and CBS News (an American news agency). Established in 1996, Al Jazeera maintains that as a news agency, it aims at “putting the human being directly at the centre” developing an alternate non-Western discourse that focuses on marginalized voices. Marc Lynch, a specialist in Middle East politics and Arab media, reiterates the importance of voices by shedding light on Al Jazeera’s tagline. Lynch (2006) observes that “‘The Opinion and the Other Opinion’ [Al Jazeera’s tagline] suggests the

existence only of two competing, oppositional opinions, while also—crucially—suggesting that al-Jazeera’s oppositional ‘other opinion’ represents the voice of the people against that of power” (77). Catering to multiple voices, Al Jazeera serves as an important platform for tracing mini-narratives. Along with this *The Friday Times* and *The Times of India* provide insight into the gender politics in South Asia. Describing themselves as offering 'a diverse range of perspectives' (TFT) and as the 'largest digital company' (TOI), *The Friday Times* and *The Times of India* serve as key media sources. Highlighting the role of media, Catherine Happer and Greg Philo suggest in their article, “The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change” (2013), that media sites “are key to the setting of agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects” (322). *The Friday Times* and *The Times of India* can be seen as prime media sources that bring attention to subjects that are vital to the historical and current political atmosphere of the subcontinent. Analyzing the impact of media and news in South Asia, Sukanya Natarajan in the article “Understanding the Role of Media in South Asia” (2017) comments that “in this region, media plays an increasingly important role in propagating mass wakefulness by shaping public opinion day in and day out” (138). Natarajan goes on to explain that “mainstream literature available on the cultural and political history of the fourth estate of all democracies in south Asia often ignores media’s role as an important catalyst accountable for these social and political metamorphosis” (138). This role of media in raising awareness can help in highlighting issues relating to social justice and gender equality. On the other hand, in depicting moments of transformation, media sources help in analyzing transformations as progressive and/or regressive. Unlike the novels explored in the dissertation, which reflect on gender through

historical or fictional lenses, news media operates with a shorter temporal lag, offering real-time depictions of social changes. This allows for the tracking of contemporary shifts in gender norms, providing a dynamic view of social transition and the ongoing negotiation of gender roles in today's society.

This chapter depends on these sources for its analysis because of their ability to narrate current events that depict cultural and regional scenarios. In its description, *Al Jazeera* explains that “Al Jazeera is also continuing to pioneer new and emerging storytelling techniques that cater to a new generation, presenting an ever-innovative portfolio of digital products that inform, empower, and educate, whilst maintaining its founding principles” (*Al Jazeera*). Seen as a reflection of current times, online news articles can provide insight into the changing dynamics of patriarchy and gender politics that are crucial in understanding women's position today. While some of the news sources are used to situate the argument in the current times, others help in analyzing the politics of representation, the evolving nature of patriarchy, and women's third space. The analysis of news reports on honour killing from CBS News examines the politics of representation and the creation of an East/West dichotomy that pushes the issue of patriarchy to the background, however, the subjugated and marginalized woman remains. The third section, FGM, examines news reports from *The Independent* (a British online newspaper) because of the revival of FGM in the news due to Amina Noor's case. Britain has seen an increasing number of FGM cases recently in its diaspora communities and despite strict laws for its prevention and abolition, the news still highlights the presence of FGM.

This chapter argues that patriarchal forms of control have evolved from their prior versions but are still a part of women's lives today. The presence of cases in the news today presenting violence against women attests to the living quality of patriarchy. The presence of violence against women in online sources that document everyday life depicts the patriarchal nature of society and various forms of shackles that are placed on women in the East and West.

Widow Immolation

By focusing on the evolving nature of patriarchy, this section argues that despite the abolishing of sati by the British and the Indian state, patriarchal approaches towards the construction of the image of a good woman prevail and are enacted through agents of patriarchy (such as men and women who conform to patriarchal practices in marginalizing other women). This section opens by examining the *perceived* link between religion and the practice of widow immolation – used by patriarchy to hide and conceal patriarchal control – giving a brief history of its abolition. The analysis then moves towards two cases of sati: one recorded in September 1987 and the other in May 2023. In these cases, both women made an apparently *voluntary* decision to end their lives. This section will analyze the role of patriarchal teachings that led these women toward a willing death by adhering to a patriarchally defined version of womanhood.

The term 'widow immolation' would usually bring to mind the precolonial era in India when the practice of sati (or widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre) was common. The practice was outlawed by the British in 1829, but its institutionalization

had been a source of marginalization for women both by the British and the Hindu majority. While the Hindu majority glorified sati because of its perceived traditional and religious values, the British officials' delayed response in abolishing the practice depicted their interest to keep "the East India Company's economic and political stakes [safe] in India" – as suggested by Lata Mani in her 1986 article (WS34). Sati was eventually outlawed; however, instead of defining the 'practice' as cruel or barbaric, the colonial officials aimed for the interpretation of scriptures that had glorified sati. Lata Mani in her article "Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early Nineteenth Century Bengal" (1986) states that "the tactic of gathering scriptural evidence was thus an attempt to challenge sati in such a way as to preclude a threat to public order" (WS34). Upon further scrutiny and consultation with the pundits, "it had become clear ... that the older scriptures made no mention of sati, but rather glorified ascetic widowhood. Even more recent texts did not enjoin sati but merely recommended it" (WS34). In this case, sati – the woman – remains confined to the periphery while the debate is structured around the Indian tradition. Anne McLeer in her article "Saving the Victim: Recuperating the Language of the Victim and Reassessing Global Feminism" (1998) highlights a similar idea. McLeer suggests that "both abolitionists and promoters of sati (all members of the male establishment) used brahmanic scripture as justification of their position. The female subjectivity of the sati was not allowed to enter into the debate" (47). As a result, the female figure was used as a battleground upon which the traditions of India were discussed. The absence of the female victim was so magnifying that "even the abolitionists failed to mention cruelty as a reason for opposing the practice" (McLeer 47).

While the British officials looked for religious grounding for sati in the scriptures, the absence of references that would encourage sati in the scriptures exposed a major patriarchal scheme (since patriarchal religious authorities justified the practice through religion): the manipulation of religion that constantly placed women on the funeral pyre of her husband. Most of the people were ignorant of the actual religious references to sati and equated the practice with religion. Mani explains that “religion was equated with scripture. Knowledge of the scriptures was held to be largely the monopoly of brahmin pundits. Their knowledge was however believed to be corrupt and self-serving” (WS35). In other words, religion was used as a self-serving tool and Brahmin pundits used it to instill patriarchal viewpoints. John Stratton Hawley (1994) also refers to the lack of religious justification for sati. While describing the meanings of the word ‘sati’, Hawley explains that one version of sati refers to the goddess Sati. Exploring the religious tale, Hawley explains that “strictly speaking, Sati does not commit sati—at least not in any major version of her myth. True, she does sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband Shiva, whom she feels has received a grievous insult from her father Daksha” due to his exclusion from the event Daksha had arranged (14). However, there is no evidence of Shiva’s death before that of Sati. Hawley further suggests that Shiva himself carried Sati’s corpse “throughout India, even if he is driven almost insane by her death. Interestingly, the motif of self-immolation is entirely absent in several tellings of this story: Sati dies not by burning but by retreating into an irreversible yogic coma” (14). This magnifying loophole between the teachings of scriptures and their manipulation by Hindu pundits not only marginalized the female subject but literally eliminated her setting patriarchal beliefs and practices in stone. While this loophole might speak directly to the

events of the past, its iterations and consistent presence can be seen in the lives of women, for example, during partition. The tale of widow immolation both highlights the reliance on religious narrative to marginalize women as well as exposes the religious façade used by patriarchal religion to hide the source of control. In the same manner, during partition, the source of patriarchal control was masked behind religious turmoil. Ice-Candy man was able to abduct and exploit Ayah's body because partition provided him with the means to hide his desire to possess Ayah. Similarly, Kusum's death was justified through a religious discourse even though it only served Bachan Singh and Jeevan's patriarchal honour.

The word *sati* can refer to two things: one, the act of burning, and the other, the woman. In terms of describing the woman, the definition revolves around her role as a wife. Hawley describes that “a *sati* is a good woman (*sadhvi*), a woman devoted to her husband (*pativrata*) . . . according to classical Hindu formulations, a good woman is one devoted to her husband, *sati* comes to mean a truly faithful wife” (12, 13). Paul B. Courtright in his chapter “The Iconographies of *Sati*” (1994) describes *sati* – the woman – as a “virtuous woman, a woman ontologically bonded to her husband. Such a woman goes wherever her husband goes, and even death offers no unbreachable obstacle to their union . . . For the traditionalist, *sati* epitomizes wifely devotion” (28). The Sanskrit word *sati* also means ‘virtuous woman’. *Sati* in reference to women, therefore, produces a certain definition of womanhood that women were encouraged to conform to. Tanika Sarkar in her 2013 article “A Just Measure of Death? Hindu Ritual and Colonial Law in the Sphere of Widow Immolations” while explaining the definition of the word ‘*sati*’ says that “*Sati* is a Sanskrit

word that denotes three quite distinct things: the virtuous woman, the chaste wife, and the immolated widow. In British usage, the ritual act, too, was denoted by the same name: *suttee*” (159). Sarkar highlights that these various meanings of the word sati are connected. The various connotations “form equivalents, but they also form an ascending chain: the good woman is above all a chaste wife, and the ultimate proof of her chastity is her consent to self-immolation” (159). Through these definitions, the role of a woman as a devoted wife and a chaste woman was evoked. Although a majority of the accounts of sati depict it as a voluntary action, women are usually *encouraged* to conform to patriarchally defined womanhood in the same way women during partition were encouraged to sacrifice themselves for the honour of the family. The following case of Roop Kanwar’s immolation will depict the prevailing constrictive patriarchal definition of womanhood that still pushes women towards the burning pyre.

In September 1987, Roop Kanwar’s death brought sati – the practice – back to life. Gayatri Misra (2020) in her popular article in *Feminism in India* titled “Roop Kanwar: The Last Known Case of Sati in India and its Relevance Today” invokes a 1987 incident in which an eighteen-year-old girl named Roop Kanwar “had *taken the decision to jump* into the funeral pyre of her husband in an act of self-immolation that came to establish a legacy that would live on for years to come” (emphasis mine Misra). Terming it “the *last known case of sati* in India”, Misra highlights that the incident was described “as a *voluntary action*” and “has garnered immense attention and spurred a new chain of debates and movements” (Misra).

Conforming to the ancient versions of sati, Roop Kanwar's incident became a public spectacle. A huge crowd gathered to witness the chaste woman voluntarily burning herself on the pyre. At face value, Roop Kanwar's death depicted the way "women were indoctrinated to believe that their destiny lay in committing their lives to their husbands even after death" (Misra). This belief favored men even in death. The idea of associating a woman with her husband dominated to such an extent that, in cases of sati, women were expected and encouraged to prove themselves as chaste and obedient wives by following their husbands to death. This notion also holds in the case of Kusum when she was expected to sacrifice herself for the honour of the family. When Bachan Singh narrates the story to his daughter, Roop, he talks about Kusum's ability to understand. Talking to Roop, Bachan Singh narrates: "I called to Kusum—she was on the terrace ... I took her into my sitting room and I told her what Sant Puran Singh said we Sikhs must do, and that I had to do it now. She understood" (7825). By reminding Kusum of her religious obligations as a Sikh, Bachan Singh asks her to sacrifice herself as is expected of her by the laws of her religion. In the same manner, sati as a tradition was a way of keeping women hooked to the laws of religion as they were adjusted, interpreted, and exploited by men. Sati "was actually a message for wives and living widows to abide by gender norms, however severe, rather than a command for widows to die by burning" (Sarkar 160). In other words, the burning was to ensure the wife's commitment to patriarchal norms while giving the impression of religious grandeur.

Roop's death highlights the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and tradition working towards the marginalization of the female figure. I argue that the patriarchal influence over

religion and tradition, in the case of sati, presents widow immolation as a way of conforming to gender norms while presenting the act as voluntary. In the face of these intersections, eighteen-year-old Roop is a victim created by patriarchal norms forcing her to burn with her dead husband. Roop Kanwar's age played a crucial role in her being a sati. As an eighteen-year-old girl, Roop Kanwar was still young and sexually active. Her young body was interpreted as a threat and had to be sacrificed. We see a similar reasoning in the case of Bachan Singh when he decides to dismember Kusum's body while leaving his sister Revati Bhua and maid Gujri. When Roop asks him the reason for leaving the other two women, Bachan Singh responds by saying that "Revati Bhua was old, if her izzat went, what man would feel dishonoured? Gujri was already a widow, long past childbearing age" (7797). Kusum was the only woman whose body was a potential target since she was young and could give birth. The eagerness of Roop Kanwar's family to perform the ritual was perhaps a means of securing Roop Kanwar's body that could bring dishonour. While the spectators hail the incident as voluntary, Misra explains that "there were various evidences to show that Roop Kanwar might have been sedated and even showed resistance that was not visible across the huge pile of fire and smoke that engulfed everything in sight," (Misra). The spectacle was observed by many who were familiar with the abolition of the practice, yet Kanwar was hailed as a goddess for performing the act, indicating the victory of patriarchy and its manipulation of religious traditions in marginalizing women.

Even today, after thirty-three years since the incident, people continue to revere her and the funeral site where a makeshift shrine has been constructed in her memory. A

‘chunri ceremony’ was held, 13 days after the incident with festivities, amidst a lot of apprehensions and in violation of court orders, where people took out on the streets of Deorala in a moment of glorification, one which is symbolic of brothers walking the bride in the traditional Hindu wedding ceremony (Misra).

By critically analyzing the incident, Misra highlights the creation of a narrative of grandness with widow immolation in a patriarchal culture. Such a narrative depicts the cultural importance of widow immolation by comparing the widow to a newlywed bride. In the case of Roop Kanwar, this narrative of grandness depicts the community’s reverence for the death of the woman and the conversion of the site of her death into a shrine. Kanwar’s funeral procession is equated with the ‘chunri ceremony’ – a wedding ritual where the brothers walk the bride and in doing so the event becomes that of celebration where the woman conforms to the cultural and patriarchal norms. Misra’s critique is embedded in the language she uses to describe the “moment of glorification” amidst the “violation of court orders”. The phrasing here indicates Misra's disapproval of the incident and highlights the disregard of laws by society’s patriarchal norms. The imagery of “wedding” and “bride” in a widow immolation incident function as a powerful narrative device; it depicts the cultural discourse of romanticizing a woman’s death as long as it serves patriarchal purposes. The imagery of the bride is quite often associated with the immolated widow. Through this association, both celebration and death are linked to the institution of marriage. In a 1991 article titled “The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India”, Wanda Teays examines the issues of dowry in India. In the article, Teays draws a parallel between dowry deaths and sati and suggests that

both practices are similar since they end up presenting a dead woman. Seeing dowry deaths as “a strange inversion of sati”, Teays comments that “in sati, as the ultimate gift to her husband, the ideal wife goes up in smoke in her husband's funeral pyre, a sacrifice of religious honour and communal satisfaction” (29). On the other hand, “in dowry burnings, the bride is set ablaze by her husband's family, a figure of dishonor, sacrificed out of consumer dissatisfaction” (29). In both cases, the burned woman remains a common factor. Through the invention of the mythical discourse that connects widow immolation with the imagery of a bride, the community reinterprets and redefines Roop’s act as voluntary and virtuous while eliminating her agency and the tragedy of her death from the incident.

The image of the bride has emerged as a consistent metaphor depicting the death of the woman’s agency and sense of self. In the case of sati, this death is literal. Discussing the event of sati, Urvija Priyadarshini and Rekha Pande in their article “Sati Remarried and Celibate” (2021) explain that “the ceremonial nature of Sati was as grand as a wedding. It entailed a grand procession with music and dance to the cremation grounds. The woman was bathed and readied with all jewellery and make-up like a bride with her bridal symbols on her body” (48). The event in all of its grandeur gave the impression of celebration. Although the spectators celebrated the event like a wedding, for the woman it meant literal death in her bride-like demeanor. In the same manner, when Ice-Candy man presents Ayah at the end of the novel, she is dressed like a bride indicating the death of her agency. Her outward look is constructed by Ice-Candy man to give the impression that she is in a consensual and happy relationship. However, this façade is suddenly broken when Ayah speaks for herself and

makes an effort to voice her preference. In the case of Roop Kanwar, her sedated state forces her to maintain the façade of consent and apparent agency.

Connecting self-immolation with the imagery of a newlywed bride, Misra highlights the erasure of the atrocity embedded in the act of self-immolation and its presentation as a grand and ideal death that every woman should seek. Through this grand image, the spectators have allowed Kanwar to secure a respected spot in their minds as she becomes the embodiment of an ideal Hindu woman. In the chapter titled “Truth and Sacrifice: Sati Immolations in India” (2001) Lindsey Harlan talks about the connection sati might share with the concept of martyrdom. Highlighting the grandness of the event of widow immolation, Harlan mentions that “worth noting is the fact that the sati, preparing to die, demands lots of ornamentation. A sati is expected to adorn herself in her very best things before processing to the pyre. She puts on the jewels given her as a bride when she entered her sasural [in-laws]” (123). The presence of jewelry thus plays a crucial role in making the sacrifice legitimate by fulfilling the conditions associated with it. Harlan describes that “more jewelry, especially that given by the husband, indicates the success the wife has had in earning her husband’s affection through loving service and by sacrificing her desires to fulfill his” (123). The jewelry becomes a statement of “her very status as a beloved and dutiful wife—a *pativrata*—one who has sworn (literally, taken a vow, *vrata*) to protect and serve her husband (*pati*)” (123). The discourse regarding sati therefore works towards glorifying the dying woman appreciating her *desire* in fulfilling her role as a chaste Hindu woman. Such “immolations filled sufferings inflicted by the norms of Hindu gender on women with

positive meaning: with their heavenly promise, burnings transvalued her lived experience of gendered pain” (Sarkar 160). Women were made to believe that through the pain of immolation, they would gain something heavenly or spiritual after death. As a result, immolations portrayed the image of an ideal Hindu woman who would embrace death for a greater reward and prove her worth as a chaste and devoted wife.

Along with the image of a devoted wife, sati also invoked images of honour. As per sati tradition, the woman who dies with her husband remains successful in keeping her family’s honour intact. Mohammad Shamsuddin in his article “A Brief Historical Background of Sati Tradition in India” (2020) sheds light on the link between honour and sati – the woman. Shamsuddin claims that “a widow gains dignity and power if she decides to die alongside her husband, and by doing that, she brings honour to her husband's family. Therefore, by her dignified sacrifice, the widow can avert being despised and procure glory for herself and her family” (49). Roop Kanwar’s death also depicts images of glory that are associated with patriarchal honour. Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar also reiterate this idea in their book *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* (2008) with the comment that as sati, the woman on the burning pyre, reaps “honour and merit for herself, her husband and their families” (21). The association of honour with the female body is a concept explored at length in the first chapter, which examined how religious honour is placed within the female body. Just as patriarchal religious discourse ties honour to the female form, nationalist discourse similarly performs this function. Misra (2020) explains that

Nationalist discourses are built around women's bodies as the symbol of national honour... The custom of sati reflects this very idea. The young widow needs to be *tamed* and her sexual desires *controlled*. Therefore, to maintain her *chastity* the only way that remains is to burn her alive" (Misra).

This connection between women's bodies and national honour is also evident in the partition of India, where women became the target of mass violence, specifically with hatred directed toward their bodies. In the case of sati, this association transforms the figure of the woman into a symbol of motherly purity, but it also takes on a sexual dimension, binding the woman to perform her role as a wife by sacrificing herself with her husband. Kanwar's image before the burning of the pyre presents her dressed as a Hindu bride while "her husband lay in her lap and she is portrayed as a mother cradling her son" (Misra). Such images associate the idea of servility to the female figure where she is forced to reside within her roles as a wife and/or a mother. This glorification of a woman as a wife or a mother is sanctified by patriarchal religious narratives and reinforces the patriarchal narratives that constrain women's lives. Kanchan Mathur in his article "Body as Space, Body as Site" (2008) explains this idea when he says that "social norms and practices also define women's spaces vis-à-vis men i.e., her identity is linked to her role as a mother, wife or daughter; they carry the burden of 'honour' and 'shame'" (55). As a result, "the expectation from her is a negation of herself as a woman and submerging her existence with the male. Women do not have the right to express their desires and discussions, especially pertaining to their bodies and sexuality are a taboo" (55). Mathur explains that once these ideas become the norm, "as a corollary she has

no right to exist after the death of the husband even if she is capable of supporting herself financially” (55).

The discourse regarding sati depicts two major aspects: the presentation of the woman as a chaste wife and her voluntary decision to immolate herself. For a successful immolation to take place, the woman’s consent needs to be shown. The importance of consent is crucial here, especially in terms of Roop Kanwar’s existence as a subaltern. Gramsci argues that for proper hegemony to take place, the consent of the subaltern is crucial. Therefore, the consent is engineered by the ones in control by making the subaltern complicit in its subalternity. Roop’s immolation is an example of the way patriarchy manipulates not only Roop but the entire community into believing that her death is a means of elevating Roop as a revered female figure. The patriarchal system, therefore, does not depend only on enforcing control; rather, it creates the image of a saviour who agrees to immolate herself. Tanika Sarkar observes that “in Gramscian terms, organization of subaltern consent is an essential part of ideological leadership that aspires to hegemonic authority rather than to coercive power alone” (161). In the case of sati, “the transformation of the subordinated wife and widow into a savior figure by extracting her consent to her own burning is, perhaps, the most spectacular instance of mobilizing consent, of ensuring hegemony” (161). This is one of the reasons that cases of sati are presented as voluntary. It gives the impression that the woman wanted to die to conform to her gender role and society endorses this impression. All efforts of resistance on the part of the woman are ignored and the woman is presented as a consenting figure.

In Roop Kanwar's case, although a majority of the people maintained that it was a voluntary act, some iterations of the event conveyed a different idea. In a report titled "Trial by Fire: A Report on Roop Kanwar's Death" (1987), it is written that eyewitness accounts relay that "far from being voluntary, Roop Kanwar's sati was, in fact, the result of a combination of events and actions which abdicate the helplessness of the teenaged girl" (6). Since Roop Kanwar's efforts of resistance were constantly masked as her consent, the event was framed as a voluntary act on the part of the burning woman. A young boy who had witnessed the event mentioned that Roop Kanwar was "swaying from side to side as she came out of the house" (7). According to the report another boy claims that "Roop was frothing at the mouth" (7). These contrasting accounts poke holes in the neatly constructed narrative of Roop Kanwar's sacrifice as voluntary. Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari in their article "Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan" (1991) talk about how widow immolation is ideologically supported and normalized by various societal institutions and belief systems. It explores the relationship between patriarchy, systemic violence, and the consent needed to perpetuate widow immolation practices. While examining Om Kanwar's immolation (another major incident of widow immolation on Aug 30, 1980), the authors say that "the immolation of Om Kanwar was represented as a 'voluntary' act. We should note at the outset that every successfully carried out immolation is always narrated as a story of pure volition on the part of the dead woman" (WS4). The complete act of sati, therefore, merges the chaste woman and her voluntary action together and presents an agent conforming to her gender role while fulfilling a religious task. Before Roop Kanwar voluntarily agrees to her immolation "she ran and hid

but was dragged back; she was surrounded by armed guards on the way to the funeral, and her struggle to escape when the pyre was lit was prevented by these guards as well as by the logs and coconuts piled on her” (Vaid and Sangari WS6). In addition to this “the senior male members and/or her father-in-law are unexplainably called away at the time, or as in this case, conveniently fall unconscious for three hours” (WS6). All the other agents who could have prevented the incident also go missing. For example, “the village 'patwari' or 'sarpanch' is either missing or on his way to the police station which he never reaches on time” (Vaid and Sangari WS6). The coincidental disappearance of male family members and the community registrar highlights the way patriarchy frames Roop’s immolation as a voluntary act while hiding the source of patriarchal control. During the absence of these male members, Roop Kanwar is dragged and placed on a burning pyre while the act is presented as voluntary. The enforced voluntary action sets Roop on the path of glory while she fulfils the patriarchal definition of womanhood. Roop Kanwar’s brutal final moment brings to light Roop’s statement from *What the Body Remembers* when she thinks that “*If men treat a woman they know to be of their own quom in this cruel way, can any woman be safe*” (emphasis original 7206).

The visible agreement of onlookers during episodes of sati and their lack of effort in preventing the act also conveys the acceptance and implementation of patriarchal gender norms. Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1994) explains that “the event also reinforces the base appetites of the male members of the audience to see women suffer, while in women sati confirms the ideology that women's strength lies in the act of sacrifice and the endurance of

untold pain” (105). In this case, women become agents of patriarchy by enforcing patriarchal values of wifely devotion that lead women like Roop to death. The public sentiment is also reflected through Roop’s *chunri* ceremony (a ritual where a red veil is placed on a trident). Despite the debates of declaring Roop’s immolation as murder,

The excitement over the planned chunari ceremony ballooned unchecked as news of the now "miraculous" sati, with burgeoning anecdotal evidence, spread from the village to the district, the state, New Delhi, and beyond . . . Approximately 10,000 pilgrims were debouched daily from trucks, buses, and camel carts, and many traveled miles on foot to gather in the village of Deorala for the forthcoming ceremony (Oldenburg 107).

The public reaction highlights its acceptance of Roop’s immolation, and it portrays this acceptance by being a part of the elaborate ceremony. Roop’s immolation depicts the way patriarchal norms are imposed on women through the guise of religious traditions and the way women’s actions are presented as voluntary participants in their own deaths.

Roop’s case is defined as the last *known* case of sati in India. Because of its occurrence in the late 20th century when the practice was banned by the Indian government, the case garnered massive attention. The narrative regarding sati after Roop’s death shifted towards “the women involved—their lives, the pain they endure, the cruelty and barbarity they experience, and the resultant negation of the meaning of their separate existence” (Oldenburg 104). With this shift in narrative, the response of women also shifted highlighting the development of a mini-narrative. May of 2023 brought the latest news regarding an

incident of widow immolation. Although the act itself did not fit the definition of sati entirely, the motive intersected with the theme of self-immolation. The *Times of India*, an Indian digital newspaper, reported in May 2023 that a body was fished out of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad, India, of a 28-year-old girl named Sangita Lakhra. It is reported that Sangita committed suicide because of the building pressure from her in-laws demanding “her to become a Sati” (TOI). Sangita’s “husband Vishnu Kumar, a developer from Rajsamand in Rajasthan died in an accident on May 10, 2022”, after which her in-laws kept pressuring Sangita to perform the act (TOI). The rationale given to Sangita by her in-laws was associated with proving her worth as a woman⁴. The police reported that “her in-laws used to tell her that she must become a Sati if she was a woman of good character”, an ideology that coincided with the theme of Sati before and during the British Rule (TOI). Sangita “continued to live with her in-laws after the tragedy but fed up with being taunted for her husband's death, she moved to her parents' house in Surat” (TOI). Sangita’s death occurred because of suicide but the motivation was given by her in-laws who were staunch supporters of the practice of Sati and they expected Sangita to comply with their demands in depicting the purity of her character. Even though “the law against the long-abolished practice of Sati

⁴ While patriarchy is often identified as the primary system enforcing practices like sati, it is important to recognize that women have also played complex and active roles in sustaining and legitimizing these rituals. In the case of Roop Kanwar’s sati, research indicates that certain women such as elder female or relatives were instrumental in elevating the act to a divine or sacred status, reinforcing social expectations and communal honor tied to widow immolation. This dynamic complicates a simplistic view of patriarchy as exclusively male-driven, revealing how patriarchal ideology can be internalized and reproduced by women themselves as part of cultural and religious traditions.

was made stringent in 1988 with The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987” (TOI), Sangita’s death because of Sati highlights the prevailing patriarchal attitudes towards women.

While Roop’s swaying body and frothing mouth created a narrative of resistance narrated by some eyewitness accounts, her immolation remained glossed with the patriarchal narrative of voluntary death. On the other hand, Sangita subverted the patriarchal narrative by telling her story in a suicide note – a written mini-narrative. Both Roop and Sangita ended up dead, but Sangita’s suicide as well as her manner of death created a mini-narrative. Aishwarya Lakshmi in her 2003 article titled “The Liminal Body: The Language of Pain and Symbolism around Sati” explains that

In the case of the woman becoming sati, agency is claimed and choice is given only to the extent that both are used to destroy the very subjectivity that is claimed.

Agency and choice are threats to the narrative in the case of Sati, as she acts on the basis of a subjective understanding of self and not as 'wife' (87).

Therefore, Sangita’s display of agency by ending her life by suicide rather than conforming to the patriarchal narrative of sati highlights the presence of resistance. R. Bacchus in the article “Sati and Performativity: Towards a Western Feminist Understanding of Sati” (2013) talks about the concept of Sati in terms of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. While shedding light on the way social norms are constructed and performed, Bacchus explains that although symbolic norms are “durable and persistent, [they are not] immutable or fully determining especially because they also produce subjects with a capacity to subvert or resist them” (8). In other words, the subject retains the ability to reject the norms by subverting or

resisting them and in doing create a narrative of its own. Sangita's attempt at suicide is her way of rejecting the social norms that bind women to the burning pyre of their husbands. In her suicide note, Sangita specifies that "her mother-in-law, Kailash Devi Lakhara, and four other members of her in-laws' family harassed her by asking her to become a Sati" (TOI). In the process of naming her perpetrators, Sangita shifts the scales of the narrative around sati. Through the process of naming, Sangita diverts attention towards the agents of patriarchy trying to enforce Sangita into a *voluntary* sacrifice. It is through her note that her father files a first information report – a written document prepared by the police in countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh when they receive information about the commission of a cognizable offense – allowing the police to identify those involved. Although Sangita's death resulted in a loss of life, the event that garnered attention was Sangita's suicide note as a form of resistance and the source of her story.

The cases of sati from 1987 to 2023 depict both the continuity of patriarchal practices as well the shift in the way in which sati is treated and perceived in India. Roop Kanwar's incident prompted nationwide debate regarding sati and paved the way for the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act in 1988. The act aims to prevent the practice and prohibits its glorification declaring all such festivities unlawful that materialized during Roop Kanwar's death. On the other hand, the May 2023 case in itself was a protest against the practice through Sangita's act of suicide, and it also highlights the continuing and evolving patriarchal practices. Sangita's incident portrays a coerced widow just like Roop; however, in Sangita's case, the patriarchal culture functions subtly. Although the legal prohibitions were in place at

the time of Sangita's death, her death portrays that incidents of patriarchal coercion still exist. Between Roop and Sangita's incident, some cases of sati were reported, and many occurred that were not reported. However, the difference of thirty-six years depicted a shift in discourse regarding sati from ritualistic glorification to condemnation. The contemporary cases of sati highlight both the shift in the narrative surrounding sati and the persistence of the patriarchal narrative in marginalizing women.

Female Genital Mutilation

Although widow immolation highlights the patriarchal control over women's bodies depicted through ritualized violence, FGM is (arguably) another form of patriarchal control that marginalizes and subjugates women⁵. This section aims to look at the practice and prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in recent years. This section argues that the presence of FGM today highlights the prevalence of patriarchal structures that work to control women's bodies. I also argue that women are developing their third space by presenting their mini-narratives through social media and other online platforms (such as #AJOPINION and *The Guardian*) that not only puncture the patriarchal narrative of FGM

⁵ The critique of FGM as a patriarchal tool must be situated carefully within global feminist discourse. The term "mutilation" itself, while powerful, has been criticized for reinforcing a Western saviour complex that positions African and Middle Eastern cultures as inherently barbaric and in need of civilizing. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Lila Abu-Lughod caution against homogenizing women's experiences across cultures and warn of the "native informant" figure whose testimony may be co-opted to justify interventionist policies. This analysis does not seek to universalize the trauma of FGM or erase culturally specific contexts, but rather to foreground how patriarchal systems (both local and transnational) discipline and control women's bodies while often silencing alternative forms of agency and resistance.

but also place the female figure at the center. This section begins by establishing the patriarchal roots of FGM and then proceeds toward the analysis of women's third space.

Patriarchal attitudes towards women have long functioned to mold women into a version of womanhood that is accepted by patriarchy. The last chapter presented Nnu Ego as a victim of the patriarchal definition of womanhood that confined Nnu Ego within her role as a mother making it constrictive and burdening. Nnu Ego's tragedy lies in her internalization of patriarchal motherhood. She believed that "if you wanted children, you had to forget money, and be content to be poor [and] part of the pride of motherhood was to look a little unfashionable" (50). While patriarchy used Nnu Ego's body for her children exploiting motherhood, in the case of FGM, patriarchy functions by exploiting the institution of marriage, and by constructing the definition of a chaste and virtuous woman to legitimize the practice of FGM. Hibo Wardere, an FGM survivor and an activist, in her autobiographical book *Cut* (2016) talks about the patriarchal roots of FGM. Wardere comments that "we [women] were kept pure for men, and then broken by them. And what happened to us in the meantime was completely irrelevant in the pursuit of their pleasure, or their integrity, their masculinity. Were females really valued so little?" (60). According to Wardere, FGM is a practice that serves men through women's bodies. The repeated stitching of women to prove their virginity and chastity highlights the patriarchal definition of womanhood that constricts women within their own bodies. Addressing a similar idea, Waris Dirie in her seminal biography *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad* (1999) states that FGM is "simply promoted and demanded by men – ignorant, selfish men – who want to assure

their ownership of their woman's sexual favors. They demand their wives be circumcised" (232). As a result, "the mothers comply by circumcising their daughters, for fear daughters will have no husbands. An uncircumcised woman is regarded as dirty, oversexed and unmarriageable" (Dirie and Miller 232). The association of virginity with a circumcised woman was a way through which patriarchy exploited the institution of marriage. It helped in creating the dichotomy between an acceptable and unacceptable woman.

A circumcised woman represents submission to patriarchal notions and her body carries the mark of this submission. We see this in the case of Firdaus from *Woman at Point Zero*. As a child, Firdaus is circumcised. Her mother "brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs" (El Saadawi 16). The circumcision was Firdaus' way of learning to stay within the bounds prescribed for her as a woman. On the other hand, an uncircumcised woman not only defies the patriarchal norms but is also deemed unfit for marriage. Efua Dorkenoo OBE in her book *Cutting the Rose* (1995) says that FGM is an "extreme example of the general subjugation of women, sufficiently extreme and horrifying to make women and men question the basis of what is done to women, what women have accepted and why, in the name of society and tradition" (55). The prevalence of this practice today highlights the presence of patriarchal attitudes towards the female body that alter the female body for the sake of marriage. In this way, the female body becomes a symbol of virginity and chastity, terms that start defining women.

The continuing of FGM in various regions is dependent on patriarchal perceptions regarding the female body. According to these perceptions, the female body is meant to procreate and therefore needs to be protected for marriage. Laura Nuño Gómez in the chapter titled “FGM/C and Triple Otherness” (2017) says that “correct sexual behaviour, according to the traditional notion of patriarchal construction, is virginity before marriage, subsequent marital duty and loyalty, and, in general, a subordinate position in sexual relationships” (223). This ideology still prevails and as a result, girls are exposed to FGM – violence against their bodies. Reports suggest that during COVID there was a surge in the cases of FGM since girls were kept home and were therefore more exposed to their local cutters. An article in *The Independent* (2022) discusses the challenges brought about by COVID-19 which led to diminishing the abilities of healthcare officials in raising awareness about FGM. Safia Ibrahim, a resident of Somaliland, “set out door to door on the capital’s outskirts, a razor at hand, taking advantage of the lockdown to seek work with a question: Have your daughters been cut?” (*The Independent*). Despite awareness campaigns, girls and young women remain exposed to FGM mainly because it is in keeping with patriarchal traditions. The strong cultural link between women’s bodies and marriage also plays an important role. Through her passion for her profession and the association of FGM with a religious service, Ibrahim highlights these ideas.

Her business is female circumcision, learned at the age of 15, performed hundreds of times and now being passed along to her daughters. She congratulates young girls upon completing the procedure: “*Pray for me, I’ve made you a woman now.*” She

believes her work keeps girls pure for marriage, even though she now knows there's no medical or even religious reason for the removal of external genitalia, which can cause excessive bleeding, problems with childbirth, infections and even death (emphasis mine *The Independent*).

Ibrahim's reference to making circumcised girls women depicts the inherent meaning associated with FGM. It aims to fix women's bodies and prepare them for reproduction. While the practice itself is rooted in patriarchy, women who help keep it functional depict the internalization of a belief system that exposes women to such brutality in the name of religion/tradition. We see this internalization in the case of Firdaus' mother as well who immediately calls the cutter as soon as Firdaus starts asking uncomfortable questions. While the cutting teaches Firdaus the limitation of her gender, it forces her mother to behave in accordance with the prescribed gender norms. Chia-Ling She in the article "Nawal El Saadawi on Female Genital Cutting and Women's Rights in *Woman at Point Zero* and *Searching*" (2019) reinforces this idea when discussing Firdaus' mother, stating that "In El Saadawi's writing, motherhood is not an instinct, but a compulsory heterosexual institution ... Firdaus's mother, easily deemed a conspirator, is caught in a predicament that cuts her off from the community and leaves her economically vulnerable" (211). Various FGM survivors have come forth talking about their experience as young girls facing the cruelest form of violence against their bodies. Maya Oppenheim in her news article (2020) highlights Masooma Ranalvi's experience with FGM. Ranalvi says, "I remember it very clearly,' ... my grandmother pulled me down. She opened my legs and pulled down my panties ... The

woman then took a blade or a knife to cut a part of me ... I know I came home and cried with my mother” (Oppenheim). The recurrent reference to pain is a common trait among survivors of FGM and the prevalence of this practice highlights the normalization of this pain. Most of the survivors are exposed to this pain during their early years when their sexuality can be controlled, and objections can be dealt with in silence. Ranalvi’s grandmother facilitated the cutter during the deed while her mother was absent. The involvement of grandmothers here indicates the internalization of patriarchal ideologies concerning female bodies. A wee girl of seven, Ranalvi had to deal with a pain whose cause was unknown and yet it was to remain an integral part of her entire life.

While FGM is presented as having religious and traditional roots, it is important to understand that it is patriarchal religion and patriarchal traditions that keep FGM a part of women’s lives. The assumed link between FGM and religion/tradition still leads people to expose their daughters to FGM. In a 2008 publication titled “De-linking Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting from Islam”, Ibrahim Lethome Asmani and Maryam Sheikh Abdi explain that a part of the reason behind FGM’s link with religion is the terminologies used to refer to FGM. According to the authors, “the use of some religious terms to refer to the practice has given it an Islamic identity and strengthened the belief that Islam requires FGM/C” (2). Some examples include “*tohara* (ritual cleanliness) in Arabic and Swahili and as *dhahara* in Somali. The Somali community also uses terms like *xalaalin* (making lawful) and *Islaamin* (Islamizing) to emphasize its Islamic status” (3). While the 21st century has aggressively focused on educating people regarding the cultural roots of FGM, it is still associated with

religion which means that not much has changed for women in case of religious practices that hinder their freedom and marginalize them through gruesome ways.

A recent case of FGM is being tried at the Old Bailey where Amina Noor is being tried for assisting in the genital mutilation of her three-year-old daughter. Noor took the girl “to Kenya in 2006” for “legal reasons” as reported by Amy-Clare Martin (2023), *The Independent*’s correspondent. Martin reports that the prosecutor explained that “whilst they were there, she took [the girl] to the house of Kenyan woman, where [the girl] was subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM)” (Martin). The case went to trial in 2018 when the girl, now 16, “confided in an English teacher”. This incident highlights the *assumed* link between FGM and religion when Noor justifies the practice by referring to it as a “‘Sunnah’ – an Arabic word meaning ‘tradition’ or ‘way’” (Martin). Noor’s justification for the act was her reliance on cultural values. She explains “that it was a practice that had gone on for cultural reasons for many years” and being a product of that culture, she reciprocated what she had learned (Martin). Noor tells the court that the procedure was quick, and the child soon recovered from it, “however, she said did not check the child’s wound, ‘nor did she want to’” (Martin). The fact that Noor did not make an effort to check the child’s wound indicates the normalization of FGM. Noor took FGM to be a religious obligation that had to be completed, and her child became the carrier of patriarchal traditions. It was only through this trial that Noor learned about the removal of the clitoris completely. Noor’s blind adherence to FGM, therefore, results from her internalization of the practice as religious. One can, however,

argue that it was perhaps a patriarchal religion that Noor was following in the process of altering her daughter's body.

This case at the Old Bailey exemplifies the deeply ingrained nature of FGM and the cultural justifications that perpetuate it. Similarly, the global persistence of FGM is evident in the ongoing challenges faced in Nigeria, where, despite efforts to eradicate the practice, millions of girls remain at risk. As highlighted in the UN's report, the harmful effects of FGM extend far beyond physical trauma, limiting opportunities for women and girls across various aspects of life. A news article in PUNCH by Lara Adejoro (2023) discusses the UN's response to FGM cases in Nigeria. The report begins by focusing on statistics that depict a decrease in the practice while also addressing the delays in eliminating the practice. According to the report in 2023 "4.3 million girls are at risk of female genital mutilation" and the number is expected to increase to "4.6 million by 2030" (Adejoro). Despite ongoing efforts by government agencies to ban the practice, FGM has managed to remain a part of the narrative concerning women. The UN report highlights that "FGM violates the rights of women and girls and limits their opportunities for the future in health, education, and income," indicating FGM's profound effect on the lives of women (Adejoro). In addressing these challenges, the article cites the Report and makes an effort to portray the violent nature of the practice: "rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances, it is an act of gender-based violence that harms girls' bodies, dims their futures, and endangers their lives" (Adejoro). The continuity of FGM highlights the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes that still grip women by constantly using their bodies to marginalize them imitating the practices of

previous decades to control women's sexuality and hinder their agency. This not only questions the narrative of progress but also underscores the relevance of debates surrounding patriarchal control over women, revealing the persistence of a patriarchal equilibrium—an ongoing balance that allows patriarchal norms to remain entrenched and evolve despite apparent societal advancements. This equilibrium challenges the notion of progress and demands a closer examination of the evolving position of women in the current times.

While the article indicates the prevalence of FGM, there are constant efforts of resistance on the part of women. Women are creating a third space in response to FGM – a space that facilitates awareness regarding FGM while making an effort to connect with survivors of the practice. I refer to these spaces as 'third spaces' because they occur apart from the prevailing practice and create a zone of resistance where women may present their narratives. The voices raised by women create a space where they speak as survivors and where they can be heard. In the case of FGM, female agency and the development of a third space take place through the development of a mini-narrative. Women are using social media sites as carriers of their stories that would attest to the atrocities of FGM as a harmful practice against women's bodies. In this case, the presence of voice plays a crucial role in reminding us of Firdaus' ability to challenge and disrupt the patriarchal narrative that had controlled her body and shaped her life as a victim. Firdaus presents herself as a nonconformist from the very beginning of the novel. Meeting El Saadawi for the very first time, she begins her tale with a conviction of making her voice matter. Talking to El Saadawi she begins: "Let me speak. Do not interrupt. I have no time to listen to you" and with this,

she ensures that her voice carries the right meaning in subverting the patriarchal narrative that had long kept her enchained (13).

The creation of spaces that address and counter the previously accepted notions regarding FGM is an example of the development of female agency. The active presence of women in their third space allows them to counter patriarchal narratives that have sustained FGM through tradition and religion. The narratives that women create present FGM as a bodily injury that penetrates deep into the identities of women. *The Independent's* correspondent, Lizzie Dearden (2018), conveys the story of Hoda Ali, an FGM survivor and a third space creator. While Dearden conveys the story, Hoda Ali remains an important figure as the narrator. The need to educate is Ali's development of a third space through which prior traditional beliefs are questioned. This third space is not just a physical or geographical site but a conceptual realm where women, like Ali, challenge and transform dominant narratives. The fact that Ali's narrative reaches a wider audience through the media, specifically in the story reported by Lizzie Dearden, amplifies her voice, making her active participation in this third space all the more powerful. It is crucial to note that even though the story is mediated through Dearden's journalism, the content remains Ali's own, allowing her voice to persist, even when filtered through a public medium.

Ali's tale begins with the anticipation of FGM since her friends and female relatives had completed the milestone and Ali wanted to be a part of the pack. Dearden said that because FGM was "practiced on an estimated 98 per cent of girls in Somalia at the time, she [Ali] had grown up to view it as a rite of passage shared with her friends and family". For Ali

FGM was a source of connection with one's culture and once it's done, the body becomes a carrier of tradition. Before Ali, her six-year-old sister was to undergo the procedure. Narrating the event, Ali says "My sister [who was being cut] was crying and screaming, I was crying too and I had my hand over my mouth. I was very frightened. But when I went in, I did what the woman said. I lay down on the floor - I didn't move, I didn't scream" (Dearden). Ali also goes on to explain the purpose of FGM highlighting the traditional value associated with patriarchy, developing a connection similar to the one Hibo Wardere talked about. Ali explains that "if a stitch was out of place they would do it again," she adds. "The whole point is for a husband to force himself and prove the woman is a virgin. When women give birth, it's very dangerous. Then they are stitched up again exactly the same" (Dearden). It was after receiving FGM that Ali's health problems accelerated ultimately leading to her infertility. Ali's tale, however, is not limited to effects on her body. A few years later "Ms Ali turned 11, she fell seriously ill. It was 1991 and the Somali civil war had started the week before" (Dearden). To receive treatment, Ali was transferred to Italy because the hospitals back home were bombed. With this turn of events, Ali became "a refugee in Milan" and "she finally had doctors perform a successful reversal operation. Ms Ali and her father lived in an Italian refugee camp and later sought asylum in the UK" (Dearden). The health problems that Ali had penetrated deeper into her life: "I had pelvic infections, my organs were shutting down, I ended up in intensive care for four weeks...they were feeding me through my neck" (Dearden). Ali's encounter with FGM displaces her from her homeland and makes her own body alien.

Today Ali's efforts are directed towards changing the narrative regarding FGM which means challenging and questioning the preconceived notions. In terms of bringing this change, Ali considers UK's strict laws as a step forward but "she favours education over prosecution, hoping the former can ultimately bring the practice to an end" (Dearden). The need to educate is Ali's development of a third space through which prior traditional beliefs are questioned. Reflecting on the long history of FGM, Ali says, "My mother was cut, my grandmother, my great-grandmother – all the women before me, ... "Even though they knew the suffering and the pain, they were doing [... to] fit into society, we could go to school and not be bullied, we can get married" (Dearden). The consistent association of marriage with FGM highlights the patriarchal and traditional roots of the practice. Religion also comes into play because the idea of purity and chastity become dominant in the case of marriage. Practices such as FGM are endorsed by patriarchal religious discourse and women who undergo FGM are automatically considered pure for marriage. Ali's move towards eradicating FGM by addressing its roots depicts the emerging voice of women. These voices aim to protect other girls from falling prey to violence directed at their bodies for the sake of keeping them pure. It also detaches the narrative of religious justification from FGM presenting it as a traditional innovation.

The role of voice becomes paramount when one considers the individual experiences of women that differ based on geography, religion, economics, and politics. Accepting the influence of these factors, Berrin Yanikkaya in a 2020 article titled "A Voice of Her Own: Tiny Stories and the Politics of Women's Agency" explains that "women experience

oppression differently in relation to social determinants such as class, ethnicity, race, religion, civil status, age, education level and therefore the individual stories matter when discussing voice and agency” (10). The voicing of individual stories not only opens up a way for the development of a third space but becomes a form of resistance against the prevailing practices that confine women within the sphere of patriarchal religious laws.

This idea of “tiny stories” is particularly evident in the media forms that provide women with platforms to voice their experiences, facilitating the emergence of a third space. For instance, in an episode of Al Jazeera’s AJOPINION (2020), the efforts of Hibo Wardere, an anti-FGM activist and survivor, are highlighted. Through the use of the #AJOPINION hashtag, Al Jazeera creates a space for individual perspectives and commentary articles, allowing women like Wardere to share their personal stories. The format of this media type—the short, impactful video—affords women a means of reaching wider audiences while maintaining the personal, intimate nature of their stories. In this episode, Wardere’s three-minute video serves as a powerful example of how women’s tiny stories can spark dialogue, raise awareness, and challenge harmful practices, ultimately contributing to the larger movement for gender justice and the subversion of patriarchal control. While the episode centralizes Wardere’s prior experience and her current role, Idil’s description relays Wardere’s journey from Somalia to London reiterating Wardere’s take on FGM. Through the episode, Al Jazeera becomes a platform for Wardere allowing her to share her mini-narrative through her role as an educator. Sharing her experience as an FGM survivor, Wardere recounts that “being six years old and remembering that from that age I was a prisoner of my

own body and everyone around me who I trusted knew exactly what was going to happen to me and didn't do anything to stop it," highlighting the profound violation and betrayal she felt from both her community and those who should have protected her. (0:41-0:52).

Recalling the horror of the day Wardere further states that "that day everything around me seemed to be disappearing . . . the whole hut stunk of blood so badly. It just felt like you were butchered. For me it was a gruesome horror that I carry . . . the anger never subsides" (0:53-1:22).

Wardere's experience is important to consider here since it is through gruesome and horrifying means that she gets associated with FGM and despite that, she chooses to raise awareness about the practice developing her own third space in the narrative regarding FGM. Wardere develops this space by engaging with an online platform – #AJOPINION in relaying her story as a tale of resistance for future generations. Her interviews are published online and as a result, they are available to a larger audience. Christina Julios in her book *Female Genital Mutilation and Social Media* (2019) explains that "engaging with online multimedia tools is . . . the standard *modus operandi* of those involved in activism generally and anti-FGM cyberactivism in particular" (20). Julios further explains that "of all the advantages afforded to anti-FGM activists by online technology, it is precisely the ability to simultaneously use multimedia systems across different platforms that provides them with unprecedented access to a global audience" (20). A similar idea is presented by Purity Mwenda et al. in their article "To stop #FGM it is important to involve the owners of the tradition aka men" (2020) that states "the internet, particularly online . . . networks, are

considered effective and culturally relevant communication channels to engage” with the population on social issues (36). Wardere’s usage of online platforms and her voice develop a space for her story that functions as a narrative of resistance. Through this narrative, she challenges patriarchal traditions and pushes her way into the mainstream debates about FGM. Wardere is conscious of the effects of FGM and that the creation of this space requires encountering her most dreadful memory every day. Wardere says “If you told me 11 years ago that I would be speaking about FGM all over the world, I would have said, “hell, no!” I was never going to do it. It was too personal, too intimate and it was something that I normalized” (1:26-1:40).

The normalization of FGM is due to the patriarchal influences that have long ensured the sustenance of the practice. In the development of the third space, the role of voice becomes crucial. Wardere’s voice develops through her digital story. Anna Poletti in her 2011 article called “Coaxing an Intimate Public: Life Narrative in Digital Storytelling” considers the role of digital stories in spreading marginalized voices in the public sphere. Poletti comments that by focusing on the voices of those at the periphery “digital storytelling has been taken up by a range of public institutions seeking to respond to the changing political and social environment and its attendant suspicion about authoritative, elite sources of knowledge” (81). This highlights the way digital storytelling challenges traditional power structures by amplifying peripheral voices that have historically been silenced or marginalized. By bypassing elite sources of knowledge, which are often centralized and authoritative, digital platforms provide a more democratic space for individuals to share their

own experiences. These peripheral voices offer alternative perspectives that not only contest mainstream narratives but also empower those at the margins to shape public discourse. This shift signifies a broader cultural movement away from the dominance of elite, authoritative voices and toward the inclusion of diverse, grassroots perspectives in the formation of collective knowledge.

As a child, Wardere and other victims of FGM were silenced because of their age, and as a result, they also lacked agency. Wardere's voice not only depicts her agency but also attempts to speak for potential victims of FGM who may not be able to protect themselves. The dimension that Wardere adopts in the creation of her third space in the narrative of FGM is to challenge the patriarchal roots of the practice. She calls for an active role of men in the eradication of FGM since the practice is connected to them. Speaking directly to the patriarchal forces, Wardere says that "it's time that men own up their part and say we are not going to be part of violence and it's not going to be done in our name because it is done for you. We were mutilated for you, to be kept a virgin for you, our sexual urges taken away for you, we were preserved for you" (2:03-2:25). The quotation here is a powerful reminder of the patriarchal expectations that enforce servility onto the female body. In a call to action, Wardere invokes men to realize their role in eliminating the practices and speaking against the harm done to women in their name. Wardere highlights the way various forms of oppression such as FGM inflicted on female body function in preserving patriarchal power. The quote also portrays that it is not individual incidents of FGM that marginalize women rather it is the patriarchal ideology behind the practice highlighting the broader structure of

patriarchal control that keeps women marginalized constantly. The role of men here connects the narrative of FGM with both religious and traditional aspects. FGM is mostly endorsed by families because of the importance of virginity in marriage. It is a way to ensure a girl's chastity and purity that ultimately connects to the preparation for marriage.

While Hoda Ali and Hibo Wardere developed their third space by raising awareness regarding FGM in UK-based publications such as BBC, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph* and also by reaching out to women to make them aware of changing laws surrounding FGM, social media has also played its role in *extending* that third space. Julios explains that “all these women share in common a determination to eradicate FGM. Their voices represent those of millions of girls and young women worldwide who have been systematically harmed without their consent and left to deal with the consequences” (66). These voices play an important role in developing a new cyberspace that helps in *spreading* the accounts of FGM survivors, making people aware of the patriarchal bounds placed on women. Moreover, “the advent of online social media has propelled FGM survivors into cyberspace, turning them into so-called cyberactivists or hashtag activists and giving them direct access to millions of Internet users worldwide” (Julios 65). An important name among the survivors-turned-activists is Ayaan Hirsi Ali – an FGM survivor and a loud advocate of its eradication. Ayaan Ali's narrative offers an intersection of religion and gender. Her narrative is mainly presented through her books such as *The Caged Virgin* (2006), *Infidel – My Life* (2007), and *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (2015). Belonging to a “devout Muslim” family in Somalia, Ali sees the gap between women and men imposed by (patriarchal) religious laws at

a young age. This is depicted through her inquisitive nature that picked up religious favouring of men; “While listening to a sermon on the many ways women should be obedient to their husbands, she couldn’t resist asking, ‘Must our husbands obey us too?’” (78). In the context of social media, platforms provide a vital space for individuals like Ali to amplify their narratives, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. Social media not only facilitates the spread of survivor testimonies but also builds solidarity across diverse communities, allowing voices like Ali’s to intersect with others in the ongoing fight against FGM. Through the digital landscape, these women can challenge patriarchal structures globally, shaping a more inclusive dialogue on gender equality and women's rights.

Because of the association of FGM with Islam, Ali’s efforts today involve an attempt towards the reformation of religion that runs parallel to her efforts in raising awareness about FGM. Being actively involved in FGM campaigns, Ali has used social media as a medium for creating a third space. Julios highlights that “the use of online social media plays a key role in bringing Ali’s work to a global audience. Leading virtual platforms used include her own Twitter account together with the AHA Foundation’s website, Twitter account and Facebook page as well as its own YouTube channel” (78). Ali’s usage of Twitter has played a great role in the development of third space while creating a counter-narrative for FGM. In a research article titled “Use of Machine Learning Methods to Understand Discussions of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting on Social Media” (2023), Gray Babbs et al. use machine learning to gauge the debate regarding FGM on Twitter from 2015-2020. The authors concluded that although the information circulated on Twitter regarding FGM remained the

same, there was a considerable increase in new users. This suggested that “users differed across years but users with similar views, backgrounds, and intentions may be drawn to Twitter as a platform for discussing these topics” (9). Along with this, it was noticed that “while tweet count steadily decreased after 2017, retweet and like counts remained well above pre-2017 levels” suggesting that new users “were more familiar with the topic and more likely to retweet other voices” (9). Twitter therefore emerged as a strong social media platform for raising awareness about FGM. In case of Ayaan Ali, social media platforms such as Twitter have exposed Ali to millions of users around the world who are actively engaging with social media platforms. Purity Mwendwa et al. (2020) comments that “social media platforms like Twitter can serve to sensitize the public about sensitive topics like FGM, foster debates on the issue and highlight gaps in current interventions” (41). Ali’s Twitter account performs a similar function in raising awareness about FGM. Through these platforms, activists can continue the conversations regarding FGM highlighting the urgent need for attention towards these atrocities against women.

Ali’s Twitter account (@AHAFoundation) is a space that talks about social issues and reports the rise in FGM creating a mini-narrative aside from the conversations about the cause and effect of FGM. On Sept 20, 2024, Ali posted the following message on her Twitter account

FGM cases in England have surged by 15%. This is a global issue of child abuse and violence against women. We must treat FGM as a public health emergency and

protect girls at risk. It's time to stand up, speak out, and end this harmful practice!
#EndFGM #HumanRights (@AHAFoundation).

Another post from March 18, 2024, says

Alarm bells ring as Gambia considers reversing the ban on FGM. This cruel practice, often performed by untrained individuals using crude tools, inflicts unbearable pain and trauma on girls. We must stand together for zero tolerance against this human rights abuse. #EndFGM #Gambia (@AHAFoundation).

The usage of #EndFGM plays an important role here in highlighting the affordances of social media platforms. Upon searching the hashtags above (#EndFGM #Gambia), the results reveal various dimensions of efforts stressing the eradication of FGM. One of the Twitter handles @thegirdlengr (Girdle Advocacy Project) aimed at raising awareness about women's issues, engaged with the hashtag #EndFGM #Gambia in a post with a video of a Gambian politician defending the rights of parents to circumcise their daughters. In doing so the post brings attention to the patriarchal belief system and portrays a man advocating for violence against women. The post made on International Women's Day demands an end to FGM saying "Dear #Gambia, lets #EndFGM" (March 7, 2024). Another account documents live protests outside the Gambian national assembly with the hashtag "#EndFGM220 #EndFGMGambia" (@JahaENDFGM). While the majority of voices were of protest against the uplifting of the FGM ban, the hashtag also yielded results depicting support for FGM practices. A post presented by the handle @NationAfrica (March 19, 2024) portrays women protesting in the Gambia demanding the cut to be legalized. This highlights that while social

media platforms have the potential to bring change, they can also perpetuate negative viewpoints, endorsing the very structures that others use these platforms to protest against. Despite that, the efforts for a positive change specifically in the case of #Gambia #EndFGM dominated. In July the bill was eventually rejected and Twitter exploded with the victory of women. A Twitter account @BintiPeriod puts a video saying, “Gambia says NO to FGM today” (July 15, 2024) while also adding more to the existing hashtags: Gambia #EndFGM #FutureIsFemale. The hashtags here highlight the idea of narrative building that speaks to the experiences of women and rejects violence against their bodies. Kosnik and Feldman in their book *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation* (2020) explain that

Hashtags, which are discursive and user-generated, have become the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments, and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or be quickly subsumed within the fast-paced pastiche of Twitter. Hashtags make sense of groups of tweets by creating a searchable shortcut that can link people and ideas together (23).

Ali’s hashtag in the posts serves as a way of developing a narrative. Through this hashtag, the narrative conveys the idea of ending a gruesome atrocity against the female body. The hashtag here does not serve as mere words joined together, rather they create a story of resistance and convey the idea of continuity of this resistance. This continuity can be seen when other people pick the same (or similar meaning) hashtags and build the narrative of resistance making it a dominant movement. Guobin Yang in the article “Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism” (2016) states that “the most influential cases of hashtag activism, as

opposed to routine hashtags, have a recognizable narrative form with a beginning, a crisis/conflict, and an end” (14). This happens because hashtags “encourage audience participation. People participate by reading, retweeting, commenting on others' tweets or posting their own with the same hashtag. The temporal unfolding of such an incident is a process of people interacting with one another and collectively creating a larger narrative” (15). This creation of a narrative is mainly possible because of the way social media platforms work. These platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) are driven by algorithms. Through hashtags, social media sense the trending posts which remain dominant until the idea dies down. Taina Buchera and Anne Helmond in the chapter “The Affordances of Social Media Platforms” (2018) highlight that “this means that the digital environment does not merely offer something to its users, users’ needs and individual likings and behaviours increasingly play a generative role in producing those very offerings in the first place” (248). As a result, social media becomes a means of generating a narrative of resistance in the case of FGM, and millions of people engage with these narratives as soon as they appear on social media platforms.

Masooma Ranalvi, an activist speaking up for Bohra women, has also utilized social media as a means of developing a third space where women engage and disrupt the patriarchal narrative associated with FGM to raise awareness. Highlighting Ranalvi’s outreach through social media, Julios relays that “in the Fall of 2015, ... [Ranalvi] set up ‘a Whatsapp group’ to provide FGM-related support and information, ‘within a month, the group had grown to over 40 women from India, the UK, the US, Australia and Canada’”

(41). The sudden growth indicates the shared trauma of women who are now making an effort to change the narrative. In the article “The Emotional Broadcaster Theory of Social Sharing” (2005), Kent D. Harber and Dov J. Cohen talk about the circulation of stories depending on the emotional trauma of the teller. Harber and Cohen comment that “if emotional disclosures operate as news stories, then they should be transmitted across tellers’ social networks” (385). Along with this, the authors explain that “the degree to which stories travel should correspond to the emotional impact that the initial events have upon tellers” (385). This means that “tellers who are more disturbed by events may, through disclosure, make hearers more disturbed, leading hearers to seek their own disclosure opportunities” (385-86). This is one of the reasons for the growth of women who come together in their shared trauma regarding FGM. In the case of Ranalvi, another social media platform, WhatsApp serves as Ranalvi’s third space where women join her in creating a narrative of collective resistance. While these women had seen their mothers and grandmothers practicing FGM, they are making a conscious choice for their future generations paving a path of individual freedom for young girls.

However, these efforts, similar to the heavy influence of imposed traditional and religious limitations, are prone to new forms of boundaries that are forced upon women such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying – a product of the current times – is similar in its actions and aims to the prior traditional and religious confines that keep women under control. Ranalvi, including many other FGM activists, has been a target of this new form of female subjugation that attempts to silence women’s voices and eliminate the development of third

space. Christina Julios comments that “when asked whether she had faced cyber-misogyny in the context of her FGM work, Ranalvi responded categorically: ‘Yes very much. We suffer it [cyber-misogyny] big time and are constantly fighting it. We get trolled on our fb [Facebook] group, website. We have been threatened on whats app’ [sic]” (99). This indicates the prevalence of hostility towards women when they try to transgress the limitations imposed by religious and traditional patriarchal narratives. Julios highlights that “virtual public spaces have often proved hostile to women’s voices, with the rise of cyber-misogyny (or online misogyny) exposing the prevalence of underlying patriarchal attitudes within wider society” (95). These underlying *patriarchal attitudes* take different forms depending on the medium. In the case of social media, patriarchy takes the form of hostile groups that hinder women’s right to freedom of expression. The presence of these opposing voices indicates two things: one, the idea of keeping women tied to regressive traditional norms and manipulative religious laws; and two, the implementation of the prior (traditional) norms and (religious) laws through newer forms of control for subjugating and marginalizing women.

While online spaces have opened up new avenues for marginalized voices, especially women, to share their stories, mobilize resistance, and create alternative narratives, these platforms are not free from the reach of patriarchal control. Digital spaces often appear liberatory, offering visibility and agency to those historically silenced, yet they are also embedded within hidden structures of surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic bias that can undermine or co-opt resistance. This duality illustrates how patriarchy, rather than being dismantled, evolves by adapting to new technologies and embedding itself within emerging

systems. The very platforms that enable women to challenge dominant narratives are often shaped by capitalist and patriarchal logics that regulate what is seen, heard, and amplified. As such, the struggle for agency continues in a new terrain, where resistance must constantly navigate both the possibilities and limitations of digital space. This evolving dynamic reinforces the argument that patriarchy is not a static structure but a shifting force that reasserts its control even within seemingly progressive contexts. Despite the new forms of control, women are utilizing modern-day technology in voicing their concerns and changing the narrative about the female body. While social media has its challenges, it also allows agency and the presence of voice. As these activists create a narrative of resistance, social media platforms allow women to engage with these narratives while being in their own spaces. It can foster virtual unity among women while conveying the idea that resistance and subversion of the patriarchal narrative are possible.

Honour Killing

Similar to the control over women's bodies through FGM, honour killings present yet another kind of gendered violence that implements patriarchal authority. Heading towards the end by revisiting the theme of honour killing, I bring the analysis full circle, emphasizing the way patriarchal control develops and evolves through various ways in women's lives – a discussion that began with the concept of honour killings during partition. This section addresses different approaches to honour killing in recent times as depicted in news articles. The purpose of this section is to highlight patriarchy's changing approach towards honour killing that began with a religious justification during partition. Honour killings had the

Subcontinent held within a tight grip during Partition. In cases where rape was involved, women of faith were killed, with some committing suicide, to prevent them from “corrupting the progeny”. The killing of women to protect the honour of one’s family and religion was a dominant factor – an idea that in its time was also understood by some as showing mercy towards women. This section argues that the killing of women for the sake of honour in the present day exposes the patriarchal exploitation of religion during partition that motivated mass killings of women. I suggest that while religion was used as an excuse to kill and marginalize women during partition, the episodes of honour killing today attest to the evolved version of patriarchy that exerts similar forms of control over women using women’s bodies as a stand-in for patriarchal honour.

In an article in *The Friday Times*, a Pakistani digital newspaper, Kaura Singh Mitha (2022) revisits the historical event of Partition to present the distinction between ‘mercy deaths’ and honour killings. Being Sikh himself, Mitha specifically addresses practices within the Sikh community, and drawing on his insider perspective and cultural context explains that “across the land, Sikhs killed their daughters and sisters, usually by beheading, drowning, or poisoning. Many went through this fate and encouraged others to ‘save their honour’” (TFT). Mitha further explains that mercy death “was a euphemism for avoiding rape by any means necessary. Mothers performed self-immolation with their children beside them, while the fathers and brothers fought the attackers” (TFT). Mitha terms these deaths as “mercy deaths” since the aim was to protect the family/community/faith holders against “foreign threats.” Through mercy deaths, men made an effort to protect the honour of *their*

religion by killing women. The burden of protecting their own as well as religion's honour fell on the bodies of women and as a result, death was the only means through which they could perform their gendered religious role.

With Partition, religious identities took center stage and clashes between Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism were politicised. Because of their identity, women were treated as the prime carriers of religious progeny, and their 'protection' from the 'other' was considered paramount. Women were killed by members of their own families to protect patriarchal honour. One would naturally assume then that after Partition, these atrocities would end since clashing religious communities are now divided territorially by borders, and presumably women would be safe in their own religious and communal settings all of which would eliminate the need to "protect" the progeny through honour killing. However, in India and Pakistan, there are hundreds of reports of women losing their lives due to honour killings in the present day. The prevalence of these reports in the present time highlights the existence of continuous gender-based violence, while also exposing the religious façade utilized during the time of Partition that associated patriarchal religious honour with the female body. This is one of the reasons that Lenny's second Ayah, Hamida, was not taken back by her Muslim family once she was kidnapped by Sikhs. Her abduction violated patriarchal honour and as a result, her husband refused to have her back. When Godmother tells Lenny about the incident, she explains that Hamida was "taken away ... once that happens, sometimes, the husband – or his family – won't take her back ... they can't stand their woman being touched by other men" (Sidhwa 184). In the same manner, Qasim from Manto's short story

“Sharifan” goes berserk upon seeing his daughter’s naked body. Although the vision justifies his spirit of revenge, the act of raping another girl depicts Qasim’s mourning for the lost honour rather than his daughter.

Honour killings of women by men have mostly served patriarchal purposes. The killing of women for the protection of religious honour was a narrative that flourished during the partition. In discussing how honour is being used by men to assert their power, Ida Baizura Bahar et al. in their article “Honour Killing as Engendered Violence against Women in Amit Majmudar’s Partitions 2011” (2016) describe how “there is a sense of duality behind the motives of those killings. In the eyes of the women (or just perhaps most of them), it was for defending their honour simply as women” (223). While on the other hand, “in the eyes of the men and the community at large, it was for defending the honour of *their* religion and community” (emphasis mine 223). This duality exposes the apparent patriarchal influences associated with honour killing during partition. For men, killing women meant saving one’s religion but it magnifies the idea that it is men who decided that honour (patriarchal or religious) would reside within the female body. The episodes concerning honour killing in the past two decades depict a different tale, one that is not directly linked to religious authority but to men and their perceptions of honour. The repercussions for women, however, remain the same. They are targeted because of their sexuality. While patriarchy used religion to implement its perception of honour during partition, in the present day, honour is again placed within the female body and women are penalized for diverging from patriarchy’s definition of honour. Jonathan Brown reiterates this idea in his article titled “Islam is not the

Cause of Honor Killings” (2017) when he comments that “the women and girls who are the victims of such violence are attacked because they are perceived to have violated some profound expectation of how women are supposed to act in their society” (2). Apart from this, as stated by Brown, “the truth of the matter is that honor killings are not caused or encouraged by Islam” which magnifies patriarchal groundwork in associating honour with the female body (1).

The changed patriarchal approach towards honour killing suggests that honour killings in the current times are a result of women breaching the patriarchal standards set by men for women to follow. Roger Ballard in his article “Honour killing? Or just plain homicide?” (2011) in his analysis of honour killing in the United Kingdom explains that “wives and daughters are murdered by their husbands or fathers, simply because their victims have had the temerity to step out of line, and consequently been bludgeoned to death for the sin of challenging patriarchal authority” (5). This breach of patriarchal authority is what explains most of the cases related to honour killing in Pakistan and India in the past decade as well. One such case is that of a social media celebrity named Qandeel Baloch. Baloch hailed from Punjab, Pakistan, and became famous in 2013 after her audition for Pakistan Idol, a reality singing competition. Her fame, however, was short-lived as Baloch was strangled to death on July 15, 2016, by her brother. Journalist Sanam Maher shares in her news article on BBC (2019) that “the country's first celebrity-by-social-media, Qandeel Baloch, was killed at the age of 26 by her brother in July 2016. *It was a so-called honour*

killing” (emphasis mine Maher). This case fits Ballard’s definition: Qandeel’s death resulted from her transgressing the patriarchal limitations set by her brothers.

Being a social media celebrity, Qandeel reached out to the public as a living being through her videos and clips on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These social media platforms became sites that expanded Qandeel’s world while allowing her agency and control over her life and story. Sanam Maher in her book *A Woman Like Her* (2020) says that “Qandeel’s every appearance, video, interview, tweet, or Facebook post was in character. She created a story about herself—part truth, and part lies and exaggerations” (15). Her life on social media was that of a non-conformist which meant that Qandeel was constantly pushing her way into the mainstream while living in a patriarchal society. Sarah Ahmad in her article “The Honor Killing of Qandeel Baloch: Visibility Through Social Media and its Repercussions” (2020) explains that

Social media played a major role in giving Qandeel the space and visibility she was denied initially when she appeared on television. Her Facebook page thus gave her space and agency that her socioeconomic background could not have afforded her. Without online space, her videos and later news of her death would not have had the global outreach that they achieved. It was also this platform that Qandeel used to mock the Muslim cleric for his hypocrisy (362).

While social media provided her with platforms to exert her agency, it was also pregnant with patriarchal forces that kept pushing Qandeel to the periphery. In 2016 one of Qandeel’s videos received negative attention. In the video Qandeel “promised a striptease for her

viewers” if Pakistan won the cricket match (10). The immediate response on social media reminded Qandeel of her place as a woman in a Muslim country. One comment said, “Before you post these sort of videos think about your religion and your family...this is too much,” (10). Other comments were more aggressive such as: ““Please shoot her wherever you find her,” wrote one user. ‘You slut, if you love getting naked why don’t you go sit in a brothel?’ asked a female Facebook user. ‘Have some shame. I don’t know what kind of family you come from, are they so dishonourable?’” (10). These responses highlighted that Qandeel had breached the limits set for her and the issuing threats finally subsided when Qandeel was found dead four months later. Among these comments, the reference to shame relates to the notion of honour. Qandeel’s behaviour is immediately associated with the honour of her family, and as she appears to be transgressing the norm, people read it as dishonour directed at the family. Deler Singh and Dipali S. Bhandari discuss this idea in their 2021 article titled “Legacy of Honor and Violence” where they talk about the moral, social, and religious aspects that motivate people towards acts of gendered violence. Highlighting the link between women’s status and violence against them, the authors suggest that “honor killings are indicative of the secondary status of women in the concerned society. Although the conduct of women of the family reflects the honor of the entire family, they are not thought to possess any honor of their own” (2). In matters of honour killing, although patriarchal honour resides within the female body, the honour of the woman is barely recognized. This is one of the reasons that Qasim immediately thinks about defiling a Hindu female body when his daughter is left naked. For Qasim, Sharifan or Bimla’s honour does not exist, rather it is his own honour that must be restored through another woman’s body.

The stories of honour killing, in cases such as Qandeel's, circulate in such a way as to become an example of what happens to women who do not conform to patriarchal standards; these stories become ways for sharing with the wider public the types of limitations imposed on women and the dangers they face for not observing them. In the case of Qandeel, her death gained immense coverage fulfilling the task of silencing those like Qandeel. Sanam Maher in her book (2020) mentions that a majority of the people "expressed happiness" about the way Qandeel was "punished" (10). Maher points out the reaction of the leader of Pakistan's religious political party – Maulana Fazlur Rehman – who "stated, [that] 'We are Muslims and Pakistan has been made in the name of Islam...shamelessness and exhibitionism are a scourge in our society, spread through women like her'" (10). Such statements and public responses make the patriarchal shackles visible while also conveying the idea about the way non-conformists will be dealt with. Deler Singh and Dipali S. Bhandari (2021) express a similar idea when they highlight that "honor killings are intended to serve as a warning against possible future transgressions and a mechanism to instill fear and maintain control over women and their sexuality" (2). One religious cleric, Mufti Qavi who was accused by Qandeel of harassing her remarked that "in the future, before you humiliate the clergy, you should remind yourself of this woman's fate" (Maher). A Facebook user commented, "If I find this woman alone, I would kill her right on the spot and would hide her haram (forbidden) body" (Maher). While social media was a site that created Qandeel, it also functioned as a way of furthering patriarchal goals by silencing women like Qandeel. It is ultimately through one of Qandeel's social media posts, that her brother feels compelled to restore the family honour.

Qandeel's brother, Waseem, in this case, exemplifies patriarchy, enacting its oppressive logic through the honor killing – behaving in a way similar to Qasim or Firdaus' husband Sheikh Mahmoud. His actions, in silencing Qandeel, aim to restore the patriarchal order, Qandeel had breached. Waseem tells the reporter that “*he felt* that the videos and photographs she had been posting online brought disrespect to their family” (emphasis mine Meher). Waseem's feelings towards Qandeel's behaviour play an important role here. Based on his patriarchal upbringing, he felt that Qandeel was bringing dishonour to the family, so she had to be eliminated. This idea is elaborated in a study called “The Impact of Culture and Belief in So-Called Honour Killings” in 2019, where the author Kizilhan JI looks into the reasons for coaxing men to commit acts of honour killings. Kizilhan JI states that “the honour killers reported religious-patriarchal notions to a significantly more frequent degree, saying that to uphold and maintain honour had been at the centre of their upbringing” (4). Similar to Okonkwo's construction of flawed masculinity, Qandeel's brother cites the protection of patriarchal familial honour as his primary duty in murdering Qandeel. Shahnaz Shoro in her book *Honor Killing in the Second Decade of the 21st Century* (2017) explains that in a patriarchal culture, “honour was one of the most common words to be spoken not only by men ... Men's honour was the most fragile and scary phenomenon I had encountered . . . Honour has certainly been the power in the hands of men to control women, both indirectly and directly” (2). Since women like Qandeel needed to be controlled, her brother's actions merely mimic the standards of the patriarchal society Qandeel is a part of. After murdering Qandeel, her brother, Waseem went to their village “where he made no effort to hide . . . he was spotted riding around on his motorbike in the village's main market the morning after he

killed his sister. He needed people in the village to know what he had done” (Meher). By letting the people know of his actions, Waseem wanted to highlight his manliness. He wanted people to know that he had control over the women under his charge. Fatima Mernissi in her book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (1975) in the context of North Africa comments that “honor and purity, two particularly sensitive emotional concepts, link the men’s prestige in an almost fatal way to the sexual behaviour of the women under his charge, be they wives, sisters or married female relatives” (61).

Qandeel’s brother associated the family’s honour with Qandeel’s body and as a result, whatever she did on social media was a threat to Waseem’s patriarchal honour. Kizilhan JI (2019) states that “in traditional societies with patriarchal values and norms, women embody honour in a narrower sense ... in patriarchal societies honour is closely connected to sexuality” (1). For Waseem, Qandeel’s promise of a striptease for her viewers meant transgression of the ordained sexual laws, and therefore the subsequent act of murder becomes patriarchally justified. Sarah Ahmad (2020) comments that “Qandeel’s brother viewed his ‘responsibility’ of keeping his family’s honor to be more important than the punishment he would receive for murdering his own sister” (380). Kizilhan JI also expresses a similar idea when he comments that “the benefit of restoring honour by means of the offence and thereby getting recognition from the social group had a higher value than the risk of being arrested” (5). Waseem was also looking for social recognition as is evidenced by his act of roaming in the village making no effort to hide after the murder. Along with this, Waseem also wanted to make a statement in front of the men who teased him. The men in

Waseem's village often provoked him saying that "“Your sister is singing and dancing in her knickers and you're living a luxurious life with the money she earns,’ one man told Waseem. ‘You have no ghairat (honour)’” (Meher). A typical way to instigate men against their women, the reference to honour works effectively when women who breach the bounds are concerned. Qandeel's murder because of her rebellious conduct raises questions regarding the definition of honour: Whose honour was challenged by Qandeel's lifestyle choices? It becomes apparent that in Qandeel's case, honour was defined by the men around her and that she became a victim of those definitions just as women became the victims in the name of patriarchal religion during Partition. Meher reports that “when Waseem was arrested the day after the murder, he was presented at a press conference where journalists asked him why he had killed his sister. ‘The reason is the way she was coming on Facebook,’ he replied simply.” In another response to “Attiya Jaffrey, the lead investigator on the case ... Waseem confessed to her: "She made our lives very difficult and I had no other solution" (Meher).

While Qandeel used social media platforms to go beyond the limitations set for her by creating ‘a story about herself’ using her voice, the present-day patriarchal notion of honour silenced her – much similar to the patriarchal silencing during the time of partition. Commenting on the dynamics of honour, Shahnaz Shoro comments that “the standards of honour in patriarchal societies do not have the same parameters for women as they have for men. The subjugated position of women at the hands of men, through man-made laws, has for centuries allowed men to impose unjust cruelty upon women” (16). Waseem invents the need to kill Qandeel since *he feels* that her social media engagement is going against his

patriarchal norms that define honour for women. By doing so, Waseem also structures his version of manhood in which “the ideal of masculinity is underpinned by a notion of ‘honour’ – of an individual man, or a family or a community – and is fundamentally connected to policing female behaviour and sexuality” – as stated by Radhika Coomaraswamy in her preface to a 2005 book titled *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms and Violence against Women* (xi). Such cases expose the façade of religious honour used by men during partition for killing women to protect them from the other. It highlights the inherent patriarchal need to control women which simply used religion *as an excuse* during partition. Waseem portrays the patriarchal need to control Qandeel and this patriarchal control associates honour with the female body raising concerns and keeping women like Qandeel bound in an evolving patriarchal structure of control.

Going beyond patriarchal values has been a matter of life and death for women since ancient times. While Partition-era violence allowed for the widespread killing of women in the name of honour, such practices have not disappeared in the 21st century. Despite the global emphasis on individual freedom and human rights, honour-based violence continues to exist – often justified through evolving patriarchal and cultural logics. As a result, women’s rights and freedoms remain entangled by the manipulative uses of religion. In an incident reported by *Al Jazeera*, “‘Honour’ crimes in India: An assault on women’s autonomy” (2018) Kavita Krishnan describes the approach the judicial system has towards honour killing.

Neelam Katara, mother of Nitish Katara who was killed by the sons of a prominent politician DP Yadav because he was in love with Yadav’s daughter, recounts that

during the murder trial the Sessions Court judge asked her, “How is this an ‘honour’ crime? *Daughters are killed in honour crimes*, but here your son was killed”. She also recounted that during the appeal hearing in India’s highest court, a judge asked her how the murder could be an “honour killing” since her son was from a “good caste” (emphasis mine Al Jazeera).

The judge’s remark, in this case, highlights the association of honour with the female body and also depicts the understanding that honour killing is for women only. The judge’s remark implies what Stephanie Palo has established in her article titled “A Charade of Change: Qisas and Diyat Ordinance Allows Honor Killings to go Unpunished in Pakistan” (2012). Palo is of the view that “women serve their male guardians and families as vessels of honor ... when honor is supposedly betrayed or lost, disciplining or even killing, the woman at fault may restore honor that has been damaged by a woman’s immoral or unchaste actions” (98). Since honour is regarded as the male’s property, the judge’s disbelief in classifying a boy’s murder as honour killing seems justified. The changing dimension of reasons associated with honour killing has conveniently shifted its focus from religion, which justified protecting women’s honour, to protect the honour of men through women. According to Palo, previously “immoral or illegal sexual act justified honor killings in Pakistan” but now “a woman’s mere disobedience became enough to justify an honor killing” similar to what happened in Qandeel’s case (98).

While the practice of honour killing is often rooted in patriarchal motives, Western perspectives frequently depict these acts as symptoms of the East's so-called ‘regressive’

traditions and religious ideologies. By dissecting various honour killing episodes, it is safe to say that the motives behind killing women in the name of honour were mainly patriarchal and not religious. This is further evidenced by Arshad Khan Bangash and Samiullah in their study “An Overview of the Religious Perspectives of Honour Killing in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) of Pakistan” (2017) as they deduce “a significant relationship extracted between lack of factual religious knowledge and honour killing ... Mostly, fabricated and misinterpreted knowledge of Islam has been internalized” as the primary reason for the increase in honour killing episodes (113). Religion may be invoked within the patriarchal structure to substantiate the killing, but it is male honour that needs protection by eliminating the female body. The cases in the subcontinent in the present times depict this divergence away from religion in terms of honour killing, as seen in the case of Qandeel, but religion and tradition remain alive as the only factors that facilitate honour killing seen through the eyes of the West. Allie Shier and Eran Shor in their article “Shades of Foreign Evil” (2016) focus on the depictions of honour killings that create the dichotomy of East/West. Shier and Shor establish that “the use of the term ‘honor killing’ in the news media fabricates a racial identity and contributes to the dehumanization and discrimination of South Asians, Muslims, and immigrants in Western society” (1164). As a result, “the labeling of murders as either ‘honor killings’ or ‘family murders’ draws attention away from the underlying issues of patriarchy and the culturally induced honor and shame that stand behind many family murders” (1164). Such representation of honour killing takes the focus away from its root cause which is the patriarchal control over women and shifts it towards the ethnic and religious background of the perpetrator. In doing so, religion (mainly Islam) is

presented as the source of such evils and patriarchy disappears into the background. Shier and Shor explain that “various scholars have argued that although the East is commonly thought to be violent and misogynistic, the West tends to regard itself as having no culture at all” (1166). Such representations of honour killings centralize religion while ignoring the patriarchal forms of control that tend to be universal.

CBS News, an American broadcasting channel, reported an honour killing incident in Lahore, Pakistan in August 2016 when a 24-year-old man named Rajhu killed his 18-year-old sister, Tasleem, who was seeing a Christian man. The news report titled “‘I had to:’ Man explains ‘honor’ killing sister in Pakistan” (2016) said that Tasleem “was 18, a good Muslim girl, out in public with a man”. Her brother, Rajhu, was constantly provoked by his co-workers at the mill: “They would say: ‘Can’t you do anything? What is the matter with you? You are not a man.’... The guys here told him, ‘It would be better to kill your sister. It is better than letting her have this relationship,’” (CBS). From the very beginning, the news report invokes Tasleem’s religious identity highlighting the idea that being a Muslim was one of the reasons that got Tasleem killed. Kelly Amanda Train in the article “Patriarchy and the ‘Other’ in the Western Imagination: Honour Killings and Violence against Women” (2021) explains that “honour killings are rendered as distinct from other forms of male violence against women: they are seen solely as a product of non-Western cultures and religions and not as part of the universal spectrum of male violence against women” (145). Because of this, anything that is non-Western (such as religion or tradition) would thus constitute violence as per Western outlook. The constant reference to the label of “honor killing” in Western news

“is used to reassure Western women that Western societies have values and rights that can protect them, while Eastern societies are shaped by tradition and culture that oppresses women and encourages their abuse” (148). This approach takes the focus away from patriarchal forms of control that constitute the main reasons behind honour killing while making religion/tradition the most important factor. In this intersection of violence, tradition, and culture, the female figure remains at the periphery.

The CBS news article depicts Rajhu’s action in light of his religion and traditional values as the sole reasons for Tasleem’s murder. According to the article, it was important for Rajhu to prove his honour by punishing his sister for breaching long-held cultural beliefs which rely on religious interpretations about women’s rights and obligations. Religion, in this case, is presented as a justification for Rajhu’s actions. The article goes on to report that “*the killers routinely invoke Islam*, but rarely can they cite anything other than their belief that Islam doesn’t allow the mixing of sexes. Even Pakistan’s hard-line Islamic Ideology Council, which is *hardly known for speaking out to protect women*” acknowledges the lack of religious grounding in cases of honour killing (emphasis mine CBS News). While the article suggests that the killers invoke Islam, Rajhu had constantly referred to family honour as his reason for killing Tasleem. It was Rajhu’s patriarchal honour that was at stake because of Tasleem rather than religious honour. The reference to the Islamic Ideology Council also depicts the East/West dichotomy here. The religious council is presented as a body that rarely makes an effort to protect women and in doing so a stereotype is created about the religion and its followers. Anna C. Korteweg also sheds light on this idea in her article

“Understanding Honour Killing and Honour- Related Violence in the Immigration Context: Implications for the Legal Profession and Beyond” (2012) which examines the politicization of honour-related cases and how they create a divide between East’s culture and West’s liberal values. Korteweg argues that in “contemporary immigration context ... social patterns of violence become highly politicized” and as a result one fails to understand honour-related violence “as a form of gendered violence that cuts across societies” (137). In doing so, honour killings are seen as the product of the ‘other’ separate from the ‘self’. Korteweg comments that this gives rise to the “process of abjection – the psychic casting out of what is other in order to define ourselves as free from that which is abhorrent” (138). The CBS news article further makes claims that shift the focus from patriarchy and place backward traditional values at the center.

It doesn’t matter: in slums and far-off villages, away from the cosmopolitan city centers, people live in a world where religion is inextricably tied to culture and tradition, where tribal councils can order women publicly punished, and a family can decide to kill one of its own, even to avenge a wrongdoing committed by someone else. In the vast majority of cases, the “honor” killer is a man and the victim is a woman (CBS News).

In other words, culture and tradition under the influence of regressive religion take the main stage in Western perception of honour killings. It is the vulnerable Muslim woman who becomes a target rather than patriarchy that makes women its target all over the world irrespective of religion.

To have a better understanding of honour killing as an extension of the patriarchal form of control, one needs to understand that “male violence against women is not specific to a particular religious or ethnic cultural group, but rather is differentially expressed in multiple ways in all patriarchal cultures, including the West, where it is normalized, rationalized, and obscured” (Train 150). The violence against women is not religion or region-based rather it goes beyond territories and traditional values. This is one of the reasons that violence against women such as honour killings needs to be seen as sources of patriarchal forms of control that tends to marginalize women by restricting them to a fixed structure of gender defined by men.

Politicization of Religion – another name for patriarchal control over women?

In the previous section, I started transitioning to Western politics of representation to highlight the role the West plays in manipulating and exploiting religion and/or religious symbols in creating a biased approach towards issues that concern women. This section sheds light on the way the West imposes similar forms of cultural control on Muslim women that it associates with Eastern traditional and religious norms by manipulating and misinterpreting the meaning of religious symbols such as the veil. This section argues that the marginalization of women is a product of the constant policing of women that restricts them either within tradition or religion (through Eastern patriarchal structures) or forces them to adhere to Western secular methods by renouncing religious symbols.

The prevalence of religious narratives has long remained a part of politics. In most cases, political leaders evoke religious ideologies to entice their supporters in exchange for

their allegiances. Svetlana Lyausheva et al. in their article “‘Religious Renaissance’ and the Politicization of Religion as a Factor in the Power of Modern Geopolitical Governance” (2019) talk about the politicization of religion in matters of social and national security. Lyausheva et al. explain that “the politicization of religion acts as a complex, multi-component process that uses religious ideas for political purposes to justify political action” (373). According to the authors, this politicization becomes possible since “politics and religion go hand in hand, because: 1) they are ideological systems; 2) they have a common object of influence -the population” (374). One such example is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s statement in 2018 reported by *The Independent*. Orban explicitly states that “we [the nation] don’t see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders” (Agerholm). *The Independent* reports that these comments emerged in response to the mass migration of Muslim refugees from Syria. Orban’s statements resonate closely with the sentiments of his supporters who were in support of his anti-immigrant policies. Connecting his political agendas with a religious narrative, “Mr. Orban added that a large influx of Muslims ‘inevitably leads to parallel societies.’ He claimed Christian and Muslim communities ‘will never unite’” (Agerholm). By invoking religious identities, Viktor can distinguish between Muslims and Christians while giving the impression that these identities would not be merged in Hungary, all in an attempt to convince his voters. While there may be other factors involved, Viktor Orban won his third consecutive term in 2018.

While religion has long been intertwined with politics, the current era of rapid globalization has intensified its visibility and political stakes. The movement of people from

East to West as refugees and immigrants has brought diverse religious practices into new sociopolitical contexts, making religion an even more prominent factor in contemporary political discourse. This permeation of religion into the political sphere has mainly benefited the ones in power such as the heads of state and other political figures involved in decision-making processes. It serves as an ideal setting for people whose religious preferences are similar to those in power but in the case of minorities, it depicts a constant flux in their religious identities. One such identity is that of Muslim women; their intersection with the narrative of politics and religion presents a version of control and scrutiny under the façade of secularism. When it comes to Islam, Muslim women have been the victim of religious politicization in Muslim countries as well as in the West highlighting the idea that patriarchy is not region or religion-specific. Similar to the prior methods of subjugation and marginalization through religion, Muslim women today are subjugated through religious politicization in the West.

In recent years, there has been an increase in laws that relate to women's bodies and their attire such as the abortion ban in several U.S. states and the compulsory wearing of the hijab in Afghanistan. When it comes to attire, Muslim women have remained a special focus in the formulation and implementation of these laws. In Eastern Muslim countries, such as Afghanistan and Iran, enforced covering of women relies on religious laws that are interpreted by those in authority (mostly the heads of state). On the other hand, in some Western countries, the removal of covering is enforced – an argument that is also justified through religious politicization using the logic of secularism. By politicisation of religion, I

refer to the methods adopted by states in using religion as a means of furthering their goals that result in marginalizing a group of people (in this case Muslim women). Maxim Dias in the article “Politicization of Religious Identity” (2015) talks about the politicization of religion in terms of interdependence. Dias explains that “politics has used religion, especially the institutionalized religion, to justify and perpetuate ruling class ideologies and subsequently religion has used politics for its own propagation and survival” (600). This dependency of one over the other “seems to be mutual and universal, though the mode of it changes depending on time, place and context” (600). While Dias refers to the politicization of religion as the interdependence of religion and politics, this section will focus on the exploitation of religion by politics that aims to subjugate women, particularly by examining the narratives associated with veiling.

In 2019, Quebec passed Bill 21 in the Quebec National Assembly confirming the province’s secular status. Takwa Souissi in “Bill 21 (An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State)” describes Bill 21 as the bill that “prohibit[s] the wearing of religious symbols by civil service employees in positions of authority and by teachers in the public sector” (Souissi 2021). The responses to the bill were diverse, but they predominantly acknowledged the tendency of the bill to cause discrimination. CBC News (2022) reports on a study conducted by two-Montreal-based universities in which the responses towards the bill are recorded portraying the feelings of “post-secondary students, recent graduates and prospective students” (Marchand). The study shows increased discrimination towards Muslim women pushing them further towards the periphery. The news article highlights the response of

Muslim women where one Université de Montréal student says, “It used to happen to me occasionally. Now it [discriminatory episodes] happens almost every time I go out” (Marchand). Another student from McGill described the effect of Bill 21 in a classroom where she was on a work placement. She says “[I] watched students and the teacher ridicule a Muslim girl for wearing a hijab. The teacher said with Bill 21, you can't dress like that,” the respondent wrote. ‘The girl was mortified and silent and just 11 years old’” (Marchand).

While Bill 21 does not specifically target the hijab and bans all religious symbols, its impact has been profound on Muslim women. In her article called “Politics or Piety? Debating the Function and Meaning of Religious Symbols in Quebec” (2017), author Jennifer Guyver sheds light on the impact of Bill 60 (another secular bill proposing a ban on religious symbols for employees in public organizations) on Islam and, by extension, Muslim women. Guyver claims that “despite claims that Bill 60 was not intended to target any particular religious group, the hearings focused disproportionate attention on Islam and Islamic symbols” (31-32). Guyver further states that this was evidenced by “694 unique mentions of Islam compared to 416 mentions of Christianity, 179 mentions of Judaism, 42 mentions of Sikhism, 14 mentions of Buddhism and 13 mentions of Hinduism” (32). In the same manner, Bill 21 brings unwanted attention to Muslim women and the religious symbol: ‘the veil’ or ‘hijab’. Bill 21 is an example of the forced removal of religion from everyday life through the association of negative meaning with a religious symbol. Muslim women who wear the hijab consider it a part of their identity. This willingness denotes the presence of choice – a choice that women make in representing themselves. A hijab or face covering, if seen as a

mere part of attire, would not single out Muslim women by targeting their religious identity. Guyver explains that “a symbol may hold multiple – even conflicting – meanings ... a symbol can also perform multiple functions; however, what a symbol *does* is a far narrower category than what a symbol *means* (emphasis original 36). In other words, the action performed by the symbol is limited as compared to the way it is interpreted. Western interpretation of religious symbols of Muslim women marginalizes them while controlling women’s religious freedom and this control is hidden behind the logic of secularism.

The politicization of religion emerges through intervention in the case of Bill 21. The bill depicts the intervention of the state to define the line between the religious and the secular and in doing so targets the religious identities of minorities. The political attempt to separate religion from the mundane not only ignores the way of life for many religious minorities but also creates an “us” versus “them” binary. The trial of the court challenge of Bill 21 as reported by CBC News (2022) highlights the politicization of religion that targets Muslim women. According to the CBS news article – “Muslim women most affected by Quebec's secularism law, Court of Appeal hears” – “Perri Ravon, the lawyer representing the English Montreal School Board, argued Tuesday that Bill 21 was designed to target one group in particular: Muslim women who wear the hijab ... What symbol is drawing negative attention? The hijab, every time,” (Rukavina). As a result of Bill 21, Muslim women bear the burden of marginalization and political control by the provincial government. On the one hand, the government justifies the bill by adopting a secular approach while on the other hand, it does so by threatening basic human rights. In this debate, however, the Muslim

woman is silenced because of the lack of choice. Miriam Taylor – lead researcher and the director of publications and partnerships at the Association for Canadian Studies – explains to CBC News in an interview that in the last three years since the law has passed “we saw severe social stigmatization of Muslim women, marginalization of Muslim women and very disturbing declines in their sense of well-being, their ability to fulfil their aspirations, sense of safety, but also hope for the future” (Rukavina). The news article goes on to state that “a majority of Muslims also reported feeling less hopeful, less free to express themselves in public and less likely to participate in social and political life” (Rukavina).

The lack of the ability to express themselves can be seen as a new form of control that Muslim women face because of their religious identity. Bill 21 attempts to ‘other’ Muslim women based on their attire and in doing so places them at the lower level of social hierarchy. In one of the surveys Ben Rejeb, a law student, voices her concerns by describing “Bill 21 as an ‘insult,’ saying it suggested that she wouldn't be able to do her job because of what she chose to wear. ‘It's extremely offensive,’ she said. ‘We are essentially saying we're not intelligent enough or impartial enough to be able to be neutral judges or teachers’” (Marchand). In addition to creating a gap between Muslim women and women of other religions, Bill 21 also plays the role of confining Muslim women to a set of political norms considered reasonable by the state such as the removal of the hijab. Research scholar Nuraan Davids in the article “Muslim Women and the Politics of Religious Identity in a (Post) Secular Society” (2015) talks about the conflict between secular society and religious ascendancy. Davids highlights that two things emerge from the secular state’s insistence

requiring the absence of religious beings from public domains: one, “the constraints imposed on Muslim women by liberal democracies, and on the other hand, that Islam, as represented by Muslim women, is not constitutive of democratic citizenship” (2). In doing so, the state gives the impression that Muslim women would remain an anomaly as long as they adhere to their religious symbols, and to integrate into society, they will be required to detach themselves from apparent religious affiliations. This shows a disregard regarding the choice of women and the lack of understanding on the part of modern states about the practice of covering. According to Davids, “to treat it merely as a symbol of something else—namely oppression and backwardness—highlights the serious misrecognition of Muslim women” (7). The result is the silencing of women and subjugating them in ways similar to patriarchal manipulation of religion and patriarchal exploitation of tradition while hiding the source of oppression under the banner of secularism.

The separation of political and religious narratives depicted by Bill 21 in Quebec also brings to attention France’s ban on Muslim Abaya dress in state schools effective from September 2023 following the hijab ban in 2018. According to a news report on CNN by Rob Picheta et al. titled “France to ban the wearing of abayas in schools, fueling accusations of Islamophobia” (2023), France’s education minister Gabriel Attal says regarding the ban that “schools of the Republic are built on very strong values and principles, especially *laïcité*.” Attal provides his rationale by “using a French term referring to the separation of state institutions and religions, but which some argue has been hijacked to justify anti-Islam position” (Picheta et al.). CNN (2023) further reports Attal’s views where he explains that

“for [him], laïcité, when put in the framework of a school, is very clear: you enter a classroom and you must not be able to identify the religious identity of students just by looking at them” (Picheta et al.). While France tries to justify its ban by giving the rationale for keeping religion separate from state institutions, its constant interference and aggressive policing of Muslim women’s attire presents a different story. France’s constant scrutiny of the Muslim population reveals the continued presence of politics in religion. Joseph Downing in his book *French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic* (2019) talks about the existence of a Muslim identity in France that depicts marginalization and intimidation of French Muslims mainly because of their religion. Downing explains that the prevalence of bans by French authorities over Muslims challenges France’s notion of integration. Through constant policing through “the national burka ban, the regional burkini bans, halal food provision in schools”, Downing states that “it seems that barely a year goes by when French Muslims are not the subject of either a new raft of regulatory law or huge, normative, media polemic about how aspects of their daily lives should be structured under the secular republic” (35). In the case of France’s secularist policies, the need to remove religion from the social and political sphere emerges as a form of control over France’s Muslim population.

Similar to the narrative regarding Partition, where women were controlled and marginalized within their homes using religion as a facilitating factor, the current times exhibit this control through the forcible removal of religion from the lives of individuals. The hijab and abaya (long robe) ban specifically targets Muslim women since it is a part of their

attire. In analyzing the repercussions of the ban, TIME highlights the growing discrimination against Muslim women in its news article (2021) reporting that “a government survey from the same year [2019] listed that 42% of Muslims (other studies put the figure at 58%) reported experiencing discrimination due to their religion, a number that increased to 60% for women who wore a headscarf” (Lang). In imposing the ban, the current global political leaders ignore the role of choice that Western nations being *democracies* preach. TIME (2021) states that “on social media, the hashtag #HandsOffMyHijab has become a rallying cry to protest the amendment, started by Somali-Norwegian model Rawdah Mohamed” (Lang). Highlighting the absurdity of the ban Rawdah Mohamed comments: “How can you have a discussion about my identity, and not include me?” ... I don’t think politicians are the ones who are supposed to define what it means to be a Muslim woman” (Lang). The absence of female agency in rulings that directly concern women highlights the modified version of control women (mainly Muslim women) are encountering in the West. Unlike the prior forms of subjugation explored in this dissertation, religion in the West serves as an assumed dominant force that needs to be removed from women’s lives to help them integrate into secular Western societies at the expense of imposing newer forms of control and religious regulation. While this might serve the integration and assimilation discourse, it does so at the expense of taking away female agency. S. Benhabib in the book *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times* (2011) highlights this idea while addressing French bans that “ironically, it was the very egalitarian norms of the French public educational system which brought these girls out of the patriarchal structures of the home and into the French public sphere, and gave them the confidence and the ability to *resignify the wearing of the scarf*”

(174). However, by imposing the bans, the system establishes newer versions of control that mirror patriarchal structures producing marginalized women. Muslim women have emerged in mainstream social media by being part of protests and viral hashtags that depict their experiences in an attempt to tackle their forced silencing.

The hijab and abaya ban in France can be seen as performing a similar function that patriarchy did in the cases explored earlier. While women are marginalized in the East because of their religious identities, the process of marginalization was substantiated through the patriarchal interpretation of religious and traditional laws. In case of the France's hijab ban, Muslim women are still experiencing marginalization because of their religious identities but it is achieved under the façade of secularism since France's constitution "ensure[s] the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion" (Downing 36). Oriana Mazza expresses a similar idea in the article "The Right to Wear Headscarves and Other Religious Symbols in French, Turkish and American Schools" (2009). Mazza states that hijab bans in the West "create the same type of repressive anti-female feelings and fear of the 'others' in the outside world that are prevalent in countries like Iran, which force the wearing of the veil" (306). Mazza further highlights that "in both cases, the female is marginalized, not trusted to make her own decisions, and given a message that another culture is wrong" (306). The common factor in both scenarios is the woman and her religion. The constitutional liberty of Muslim women is challenged by the authorities under the façade of assimilation policies that not only disrupt the notion of equality but also target a group of people because of their religion.

Seen through Edward Said's politics of representation, the Muslim woman remains the un/misrepresented 'other' in the face of these novel forms of control and subjugation that use religion (and secularism in the case of the West) as its excuse. The prior self/other binary declared Muslim women to be victims of fundamentalist patriarchal religious values as observed by the West and the secular West was a form of refuge for these victims. This analogy might hold true if we consider the politicization of hijab in the East. Amanda Leloup in her article "'Women, Life, Freedom': The Politicization of the Hijab in Iran" (2023) while talking about the exploitation of religion in making the veil a state weapon comments that "veiling remains an individual and personal choice, and while politicizing it was, and is, an integral part of the women's movement in Iran, institutionalizing it has removed the individual value of the act, utilizing it as a means of social control" (58). Seen through the Western eye, this is a case of intersecting state, political, religious, and gender dynamics where the Muslim woman is a victim of patriarchy that uses a religious discourse. The belief that women were marginalized by patriarchal monolithic religions formulated the identity of the doubly 'othered' where the central position belonged to men in authority and to the Western observer. In this case, however, the Muslim woman was seen as an entity outside of the West with which the West can sympathize and if given the chance – save – setting an example of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 93). The current global scenario presents the Muslim woman as a part of the Western world, but the dynamics of subjugation have remained the same. Initially, she was marginalized because of the imposition of patriarchal religion by religious authorities and now she remains marginalized because of the presence of religion in her life. In both cases, the Muslim woman remains "the

other” who is redefined and reconstructed and yet remains misrepresented by the enforcers of religion and secularism alike. Downing (2019) highlights this politics of representation and the changed version of Orientalism through the analysis of French Muslims as the ‘internal other’. He explains that

the gendered, external other, has been replaced by the gendered internal other—with the harem and the hammam as the exotified environment replaced by the concrete tower blocks of the suburban estate. Thus, in this sense orientalism moves from being about the misrepresentation of the non-Western world, to being about the cultural practices and misrepresentations of those within Western societies who have some connection, no matter how tenuous, to the non-Western world (154-55)

The continuing orientalist structure in the West is a way of keeping the ‘other’ othered while it stays within the domain of the ‘self’. This is achieved by seeing and presenting the ‘other’ as foreign hence justifying the need to constantly adjust their identity according to Western norms. Amy Jackson and Dorota Gozdecka in their article “Caught Between Different Legal Pluralism” (2011) state that “stereotypical images promote a vision of religion and normativity as ‘foreign’ and in a negative sense strongly concentrated on ‘otherness’” (95). Following this logic, the hijab becomes problematic for the West since it represents foreignness and its continued presence requires control for secular ways to prevail. This idea is also expressed by Charles Breton and Gregory Eady in their article “Is Support for Banning Religious Symbols in the Public Sphere Prejudiced” (2015) where they highlight that “ethnic minorities represent symbolic threats because they challenge the majority's

identity through new customs and practices and through demand for accommodation” (4).

Despite the presence of Muslims in France and French diversity policies, Muslim women are represented as the marginalized other. The only way these women become a part of mainstream discourse regarding politics is through a narrative that requires them to eliminate a part of their selves to become French – the removal of hijab or the banning of abaya perform the same function.

The othering of Muslim women by regulating their clothing also gives the impression that for women, different forms of control (patriarchal or political) keep them othered and their presence in the secular West would play a minute role in their emancipation as Muslim women. In a narrative of enforcement – enforced hijab policies in Afghanistan and enforced removal in France – the state of keeping women as silent and subjugated observers remain consistent. The difference here lies in the West’s apparent model of liberation that it has long preached. Sawitri Saharso in her article “Multicultural Feminism: Finding our Way between Universalism and anti-Essentialism” (2008) states that when “we criticize other cultures than our own there is a risk that we use double standards, that we use essentialist notions of culture and that we speak for, and thereby deny the autonomy and agency of, minority women” (6). We see this in the case of bans that directly affect Muslim women where secular states assume the need to liberate women by forcing them to be liberal according to the definitions constructed by Western notions of freedom and secularism.

Joseph Downing (2019) talks about the internal contradictory gender dynamics in France that make the narrative of subjugating Muslim women more pronounced. Downing

explains that “the bans in France concerning the ‘burkini’, headscarf and full-face veil have explicit feminist justifications in their construction as a means by which women can be ‘liberated’ from the apparently oppressive aspects of the Islamic faith” (158). On the other hand, this ‘feminist’ thought is ignored when non-Muslim women in France are concerned. In case of non-Muslim women, as Downing notes, France does not recognize its “oppressive norms” such as “the obsession with being thin, the need to wear dangerous high heel shoes on cobble-stoned streets or the significant sexual harassment” yet it critiques the choice of Muslim women to wear the hijab (158). In other words, “feminism is used as the justification for the need for the French legislature to decide how to regulate the dress of a certain section of the female population defined as ‘outsiders’ on the basis of religion, race and cultural background” (158). The othering of Muslim women based on their religious identity, therefore, performs tasks similar to the patriarchal othering of women by exploiting religious traditions. Both cases present women as marginalized and subjugated objects through arguments that connect with the idea of religion.

Secular Western nations that promote individuality contradict themselves when they disregard the role of choice in the issue of Muslim women’s attire. In imposing bans on hijab and abaya, the Western nations presume adherence to orthodox religious practices whereas the donning abaya and the veil by present-day Muslim woman can also be seen as an assertion of her agency in an attempt to create a third space where a Muslim woman fits while engaging with the narrative of religion and secularism/modernity. Marit Tjomsland and Karin Ask in their book *Women and Islamization* (1998) address various topics concerning

the revival of Islam and the construction of the identity of a Muslim woman “in various national settings” through the process of Islamization (13). The engagement with Islamization by Muslim women removes the need for a mediator between them and their religion. The direct connection with religion opens ways of knowing and understanding religion in different nationalities while developing one’s own religious identity. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland explain that

‘Islamization of space’ refers to attempts to ‘re-Islamize’ society by encouraging individuals to practice Islam in daily life and bridge the gap between religious discourse and practical realities through prayer, fasting, segregation of space between the two genders, veiling of women and so on. Thus, Islamization from the ‘bottom up’ does not necessarily entail asking women to return to the home, but rather that the sexes are separated in public (7).

Such a form of Islamization helps in creating a space for women where they can engage with religious laws without patriarchal influence. This form of engagement with religions is also helpful in negotiating between identities in secular nations where Islam is a religion of the minority.

The discourse around the act of veiling in the modern day is more inclined towards a display of agency by the Muslim woman rather than a form of religious and patriarchal control that is usually associated with it. Being a symbol of agency, the choice of veiling allows Muslim women to create a third space in Western nations. Research scholars Rhys H. Williams and Gira Vashi express this idea in the context of America in their article titled

“‘Hijab’ and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves” (2007).

The authors “argue that donning hijab is a practice that allows young women to create some cultural space for themselves – it is a part of a larger identity project by second-generation Muslim young people to negotiate their dual identities as Muslims and Americans” (272).

The cases described in *Women and Islamization* depict how women “use the veil pragmatically to get room to maneuver, enlarge their scope of action and increase their independent mobility in the social world outside domestic boundaries, a strategy that is legitimized by religious authoritative discourse” (24). If the veil/hijab is seen as a symbol of freedom and agency then the Western narrative of banning these choices of women not only hinders their freedom but also challenges the narrative of individual voice. Ask and

Tjomsland explain that the changing dynamics of veil/hijab “reflects innovation made by the younger generation of women who use change of clothing to accentuate their identity and response to a changing world, and thereby even create a resourceful place for themselves within that world” (25). While the changing meaning of hijab and the veil reflects Muslim women’s attempt at integrating into the secular world with their religious identity, it also shows agency, resistance against oppressive norms, and the development of a third space.

Anne Phillips in her article “Religion: Ally, Threat or Just Religion?” (2009) cautions against considering women’s display of religion in the form of hijab or veil as false consciousness.

Phillips remarks that resistance “takes many and subtle forms, and what looks to an outsider like submission can sometimes be better understood as empowerment or subversion” (42).

Despite this change in the meaning of the veil and a potential source of agency, the Western discourse associated with hijab remains similar to the prior notions that see the veil as “the

most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies” – as stated by Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) (152). The result is Muslim women’s marginalization despite their efforts to adopt secular means of carrying their religion along.

The ideology of assimilation that the West wants Muslim women to adopt by removing their veils is dependent solely on the notion of secularism that targets Muslim women’s attire. Considering the changing meaning of hijab, it is precisely the presence of the veil that allows moderately religious Muslim women to become a part of society. The current display of agency through veiling is a subversion of those power structures (patriarchal, political, or secular) that confine women to the periphery. Marit Tjomsland and Karin Ask express a similar notion by focusing on the contemporary meaning of the veil. The authors suggest that in the contemporary context when a woman veils against the wishes of her family, she “challenges conventional expectations and explanations of male control of female seclusion thereby indicating development of a certain independence and self-reliance that opposes traditional discourse” (13). In the same manner, the usage of the headscarf despite the debates surrounding the ban expresses female agency that depicts the headscarf “as more than a religious symbol or a tool of oppression. It can also be a representation of ‘ethno-cultural identity’ – in this respect, it is worn in solidarity and in protest against the racism, exclusion, and anti-Islam sentiment that some feel is rampant in France” (318) – as explained by Oriana Mazza in the article “The Right to Wear Headscarves and Other Religious Symbols in French, Turkish and American Schools” (2009).

The presence of the hijab, as discussed above, exemplifies the development of a mini-narrative by women, where the act of wearing it within a changing discourse context imbues it with new meanings that challenge conventional understandings of identity, oppression, and agency. The purpose of mini-narratives is to present the other side of the story where women engage with the dominant narrative. Joan Wallach Scott in her book *The Politics of the Veil* (2007) challenges the dominant narrative regarding the veil and questions the constant prevalence of aversion to the veil in French politics. The mini-narrative that Scott attempts to produce comes from challenging the dominant discourse as it speaks to the experiences of those who are affected by the dominant discourse regarding the veil in France. She explains that “*this is not a book about French Muslims; it is about the dominant French view of them.* I am interested in the way in which the veil became a screen onto which were projected images of strangeness and fantasies of danger” (emphasis original 10). In exploring the reasons associated with the veil that disturbed French politics, Scott keeps her eye on the political atmosphere by presenting it as a dominant reason for aversion to veiling rather than one’s adherence to religious symbols. This is how Scott produces a mini-narrative that targets the main reason – political intolerance – rather than making it a debate about Islam or the display of religious symbols.

Scott’s analysis goes further to explore the intersection of religion and individual freedom. She highlights the case of two girls who converted to Islam.

Alma and Lila Lévy were expelled from their high school when they refused either to remove their headscarves or to accept in its place a head covering the school

administrators called ‘un foulard léger’ (a headscarf ‘lite’!), which revealed the neck, earlobes, and hairline (30).

The case of Alma and Lila exposed the complications associated with the dominant narratives that the West tends to develop regarding Islam and Muslim women. To begin with, Alma and Lila’s father was a “Jew without God” and their mother “had been baptized as a Catholic but who did not practice her religion” (30). Despite having secular French parents, the girls converted to Islam, thus the conflict of religion was already at play in their lives. To complicate things further, the French government imposed the ban that presents us with an example of the intersection of religion, family, and state in the lives of these girls. Scott points out that the dominant narrative formulated by French politics fails to recognize this intersection. In a comment made by the girls’ father, the entangled dominant narrative and the need to disentangle it becomes evident. The father “insisted on the girls’ right to attend school in whatever costume they chose: ‘I detest their conversion, their veil, their headscarf and their prayers to Allah, but I love them and want them to be happy’” (31). While Scott’s book explores a metanarrative at length, it simultaneously exposes the mini-narratives at play. It highlights the complexities of equating religion with threat while blurring the boundaries between personal and political, as illustrated by the father’s statement. In addition to this, the impact of this dominant narrative creates disruptions at various levels and also raises questions with their answers embedded in the history of colonization. The father’s statement however sums up this hostile scenario: “In the course of this business I’ve

discovered the hysterical madness of certain ayatollahs of secularism who have lost all their common sense” (31).

The imposition of bans by governments on the hijab and veil therefore appears to be the modern-day form of subjugating women by demanding the absence of religion in social lives. These bans play a role similar to patriarchal religion that confines women without allowing them a voice of their own and denying them all forms of choice. Whether it is secular Western nations or religious Eastern states, religious narrative is often used to subjugate and marginalize women by targeting their bodies or what they choose to wear. The common factor in both scenarios is a woman under scrutiny. While they are subjugated as individuals, the burden of compliance falls on the shoulders of women. In Western nations, they are required to remove the hijab to depict assimilation in a secular environment. On the other hand, countries such as Iran that make hijab compulsory do so to display a pro-Islamic view. In 2022 *Middle Eastern Eye* (MEE) reported that the spokesperson of “a powerful religious organisation responsible for defining regulations relating to the hijab and Islamic attitudes in Iran”, named Ali Khan Mohammadi, relayed that hijab is “a symbol [of Sharia law]” (MEE). While it states the country’s stance in connection to the compulsory wearing of the hijab, it also obligates the female figure to bear the burden of national identity as the walking “symbols” of orthodox Islam. The state’s strict laws represent the denial of women’s freedom without the element of choice much similar to the narrative in France. Going against the sharia law in Iran would thus be a statement against national authority, not a mere matter of women’s choice.

This chapter has shown that patriarchy is not a monolithic or static system, rather it is a living structure that evolves to maintain control over women's bodies and autonomy. Through the analysis of contemporary reports from Pakistan, India, and Britain, it becomes clear that patriarchal violence – manifested in honour killings, FGM, and widow immolation – persists despite efforts to control it. These practices, relying on exploitation and manipulation of traditional, religious, and cultural norms depict how patriarchy constantly evolves and restructures its pattern of control to remain dominant. Furthermore, the Western politicization of religious symbols underscores that patriarchal manipulation of religion is not the only way through which women are marginalized. The intersection of Western discourse of secularism also produces a similar structure of control that affects Muslim women. While certain patriarchal structures manipulate religion to justify women's oppression, Western secularism, through policies that dictate how women should dress, mirrors similar mechanisms of control. Both approaches reduce women's agency by positioning their bodies as sites of political and ideological contestation. However, despite these forms of control and oppression, women continue to create spaces of resistance and change. The presence of online narratives of subversion and agency allows women to create a 'third space' where they actively engage with structures of control while challenging them at the same time. In addition to digital activism, other forms of mini-narratives are crucial in this chapter's exploration of women's agency. The tragic stories of women like Roop Kanwar and Sangita, who were subjected to honour killings, serve as a stark reminder of the patriarchal control over women's lives. Their deaths highlight the extreme ways in which women's bodies are policed to preserve familial and societal honour. Yet, even in death, these women resist

through the very way their stories are told – offering a space to interrogate and critique the continued violence against women in these cultural contexts while creating a mini-narrative at the same time.

Similarly, the choice to veil, often framed as a symbol of patriarchal control, can also be viewed as a form of resistance. For some women, the act of wearing the veil becomes a means of asserting identity and agency within both their home culture and the broader Western context. In this way, these women create ‘third spaces’ where they redefine the meaning of the veil, not as a religious imposition, but as a personal or political choice that challenges Western interpretations of oppression. As Anne Phillips (2009) remarks, resistance “takes many and subtle forms, and what looks to an outsider like submission can sometimes be better understood as empowerment or subversion” (42). By asserting control over their own bodies and choices, women using the veil subvert dominant narratives of patriarchal victimization. As Julios further explains, the global reach provided by online platforms allows these women to present their own stories and challenge oppressive structures, thereby expanding their agency across cultures and communities. By creating counter-narratives, women puncture patriarchal narratives, asserting their agency in the face of patriarchal, traditional, and state-imposed limitations. This evolving landscape suggests that while patriarchy and Western oppressive secularism develop, so does women’s resistance.

Conclusion: Women's Agency and the Continuous Struggle for Narrative Space

“I see today a new religious revival. In this history, the religious revival seems to me the most alive, and perhaps best able to respond to the endemic crisis stemming from our cultural heritage” – Julia Kristeva (2015: 98-99).

I was twelve years old when my father started telling me and my two younger sisters to guard our five obligatory prayers. This is the most basic lesson in Islam and a crucial pillar of the religion. However, doing what was obligatory was never our strong suit. We would offer prayers when father was home and gladly ignore the call to prayer when he was not around. At times, we would go to lengths to give the impression of fulfilling our obligation by going to the room, sitting idle for ten minutes, keeping the prayer mat ready in case someone comes in, and emerging with a victorious look to let father know that it is done. The problem was not the command that was issued, but the fact that it was an obligation imposed without explanation. Father always reminded us to pray because we had to. He never explained why. Such was the foundation of my relationship with religion. For me, religion was something that had to be followed blindly. It was understood that religion differentiated the good from the bad, the sinful from the virtuous, and yet everyone said that it was meant to be the way of life. This idea always made me uncomfortable. How can anything that is so rigid in its definition of human nature be the way of life? Grandmother always said that both good and bad reside in people and I believed her because I used to care for my sister and dreamt about throwing her in the bin at the same time. It was hard for me to classify myself as good or bad; I was both. So how would I fit into my religion if it separates good from bad? The question

haunted me for years and the more I listened to religious clerics, the more I saw myself heading towards hell.

Back home, religious clerics were (and still are) the most trustworthy source of information in the case of religious matters. People rely on them for their immense religious knowledge and consider their solutions to be the word of God. What intrigued me the most was that it was always men who occupied these positions and if a problem needed to be discussed a male member of the family would go to the cleric and ask for advice. I was always doubtful about this setting. What if the cleric gives the wrong answer? What if the male member requests the cleric to tweak his response in favour of one party? My mother would brush these questions aside and say, “You can take yours directly to the cleric.” But what if the cleric is wrong?

In 2016, one of my dear friends got married. After the marriage, she came to know that her husband was impotent, and he never told her about his condition even though they were on talking terms before the wedding. She got in touch with a well-known cleric, and he told her that as per religious law, she *must* give her husband a year before deciding to leave him. The cleric’s ruling seemed unfair but considering him to be the source of religious laws, it was not questioned.

My grandmother once told me the story of a woman who came to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) seeking divorce from her husband. I was fascinated by the story at the time and considered it a ‘fairy tale’ version of Islam. Years later, I came across the authentic version that goes like this:

It was narrated from Ibn 'Abbas that: The husband of Barirah was a slave called Mughith. It is as if I can see him walking behind her weeping, with the tears running down onto his beard. The Prophet [SAW] said to Al-'Abbas: "O 'Abbas, are you not amazed by the love of Mughith for Barirah and the hatred of Barirah for Mughith?" The Messenger of Allah [SAW] said to her: "Why don't you take him back, for he is the father of your child?" She said: "O Messenger of Allah, are you commanding me (to do so)?" He said: "I am just interceding." She said: "I have no need of him" (Sunan an-Nasa'i 5417).

An interesting factor in the story above is the Prophet's response to Mughith and Barirah's situation. While he (PBUH) was amazed by Mughith's love for Barirah which prompted him to follow her in a street full of people, he did not force Barirah to stay with Mughith, who was also the father of her child. Secondly, being the advisor in this matter and a person of higher authority, the Prophet (PBUH) did not abuse his position to favour Mughith. In respecting Barirah's choice, he (PBUH) also attempted to save Barirah and Mughith from being in an unhappy relationship.

The story reminded me of the cleric's response to my friend's predicament. These are two different versions of Islam: the cleric's version is a lived reality of many Muslim women whereas true Islam is that 'fairy tale' my grandmother used to talk about. If Barirah were to go to our clerics today, the matter would close after the knowledge of her husband's love. Or even the presence of the child would close the matter for Barirah. Barirah would not matter

today. She will be told that she *must* stay married for the sake of her loving husband and child.

There is an old Indian joke about these versions of Islam in which

A Hindu goes to his Muslim neighbor and asks if he could borrow a copy of the Koran. “Of course,” said the Muslim. “We’ve got plenty! Let me get you one from my library.” A week later, the Hindu returns. “Thanks so much,” he said. “Fascinating. But I wonder, could you give me a copy of the other Koran?” “Um, you’re holding it,” said the Muslim. “Yeah, I read this,” replied the Hindu. “But I need a copy of the Koran that’s followed by Muslims” (Power 2015, 10).

The presence of these contrasting versions of Islam indicates religious manipulation. This manipulation is putting women at a position of disadvantage where they are required to prove themselves as obedient wives and go above and beyond in their role as Muslim women while following a patriarchally charged religion that does not conform to the laws and rulings of Islam. In his book, *al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (2007), Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi gives a detailed account of female experts of *hadith* (traditions of Prophet Mohammad PBUH). In his research, Nadwi explains that he did not know of any religion in which “women were so central, so present, so active in its formative history. It follows that they were recognized as ‘senior’ in a social order in which authority was explicitly based upon commitment to and knowledge of the religion” (16). The strong presence of Muslim women in Islamic history highlights an inclusive version of Islam that supports and encourages the active involvement of women. This gives rise to the question

that if women were already a part of Islamic culture and tradition, what led to their gradual exit from present-day Islam and Islam's inclination towards patriarchy? While this research explores the manipulation of religion in subjugating women, more work needs to be done by excavating the patriarchal version of Islam to understand the areas where it diverts from actual Islam. While the patriarchal version places women at the periphery of religious knowledge and paves the way for their exploitation, Muslim women need to seek their way back to the center of this debate. One of the ways through which this can be done is by looking at the institutions that demand the most from women based on religion such as marriage.

When it comes to marriage, patriarchal Islam reigns supreme. The argument that women are inferior is often supported by various Quranic verses. Verse 4:34 of the Quran has been termed the "DNA of patriarchy" by the women's group Musawah (a global movement for justice and equality in Muslim families). Verse thirty-four of the chapter titled "The Women" in the Quran has had its share of patriarchal interpretations which are now evolving into less sexist interpretations. Most of the interpretations highlight men in charge of women and as a result, excelling them in certain matters whereas other interpretations suggest men as protectors of women. In both interpretations, men are placed in a position of authority and the (patriarchal) Islamic tradition has long relied on this verse to explain the role of men and women in family law. This verse has also helped in justifying domestic abuse against women. Carla Power (2015) explains

One may debate 4:34's meanings, but one thing remains certain: men's interpretations of the verse have made millions of women miserable. Muftis, or Islamic judges, cite it to excuse domestic violence. Husbands have hijacked it to stop wives from going to graduate school, to work, or to the bazaar. The Saudi Arabian government leveraged its message to legislate a "guardianship" system in the Kingdom wherein women could not, until recently, open a business or a bank account, travel abroad, or enroll at a university without a male relative's permission (221).

Challenging these interpretations and looking for egalitarian roots in Quranic verses is one way of challenging the current patriarchal Islamic narrative. In the case of marriage, Ziba Mir-Hosseini et al. (2022) have attempted to address the patriarchal ethics that favor men in marital relationships. The book *Justice and Beauty in Muslim Marriage* examines Islamic law by looking at one of the primary sources of Islam – the Quran. Mir-Hosseini's approach in the book offers a way of reviving the 'woman' in Islamic family tradition by taking part "in the process of religious meaning making, which thus far for the most part has been dominated by men and more specifically by patriarchal voices and discourses whether from the past or present" (46). Such an approach not only allows one to challenge the existing narrative that marginalizes women but also helps in developing a new path where Muslim women retain their position as central characters.

This dissertation examines the multilayered marginalization of women and the development of their agency by examining literary texts and current news media occurrences that depict the theme of patriarchal control. Along with this, the dissertation briefly talks

about the Western politics of representation suggesting that the misinterpretation of religious symbols performs a function similar to the patriarchal marginalization of women. By examining the narratives of the partition of the subcontinent and the traditional roles of women as mothers and wives, this dissertation highlights the multiple ways through which women are marginalized. In the case of partition, religious honour is exploited to control women's bodies whereas patriarchal definitions of motherhood and marriage and the manipulation of tradition pave the way for women's marginalization through their domestic roles. The dissertation connects these versions of patriarchal control to the present-day evolved structures of patriarchy and in doing so depicts the durability and adaptability of patriarchal forms of oppression and control. Moreover, central to the thesis is the argument that despite the presence of patriarchal structures, women create mini-narratives that challenge and puncture the patriarchal narrative by presenting an alternative story. These narratives either portray women's divergence from the patriarchal structure or present women's understanding of the ways patriarchal religion and patriarchal traditions function in marginalizing and subjugating women. The presence of mini-narratives highlights women's resilience as well as their ability to create a 'third space' despite the endurance of patriarchal systems of control that constantly push women to the periphery.

Significantly, this dissertation has demonstrated that moments of crisis and transition—whether political upheaval, social transformation, or personal trauma—often add other trajectories to the patriarchal systems of control. However, these times of transition and crisis also serve as catalysts for the emergence of women's mini-narratives and third spaces.

The texts analyzed illustrate how women, in times of instability, find ways to innovate within or outside patriarchal structures, using various means to assert agency. This innovation is not uniform; rather, the dissertation has explored a range of third-space examples, from traditional storytelling to the use of social media, from understanding patriarchal structures to more radical disruptions of patriarchal control. By comparing these different manifestations of third space across the novels and contemporary contexts, the dissertation underscores the adaptability of women's resistance and the multiplicity of ways they carve out space for their voices. This comparative approach reveals a crucial insight: while patriarchal control persists, it is never absolute, as women continuously find ways to navigate, contest, and reshape the structures that seek to confine them.

A step forward from the perspective of my research can include an analysis of forms of resistance that capture the nuances in the lives of Muslim women and portray their understanding of religion as liberatory. Leila Aboulela's intricate weaving of Islamic themes into the lives of her female characters depicts their understanding of religion and their dependency on faith as a form of strength. Applying this understanding of faith to the present-day female figure of the subcontinent would be an interesting aspect to consider.

In the case of the sub-continent, aversion to feminism is quite dominant from religious authorities. They consider the movement as a step away from religion. This is one of the reasons that the "Aurat March" (a social and political movement in Pakistan started in 2018 to observe International Women's Day) faced immense resistance from the state and religious clerics. One particular slogan called "*Mera Jism, Meri Marzi*" which translates to

“My Body, My Right” became the butt of criticism. The religious authorities (which are predominantly patriarchal) considered this to be against Islamic practices whereas the slogan advocates for women’s rights over their bodies which Islam grants them. In the context of the sub-continent, the debate surrounding religion and women is not a mere representation of patriarchy. It highlights the absence of knowledge production which places the ‘woman’ at the center and this is where Mir-Hosseini’s idea of *religious meaning making* becomes useful.

How can women become a part of the center? Do Muslim Women *really* need saving from their own religion? Would challenging patriarchal Islam produce a new version of Islam or produce an individualistic brand of Islam? The shift in recent scholarship that incorporates religion into its themes, attempts at answering these questions.

The scholarship regarding women and religion has seen a shift in recent years. With the acknowledgment of underlying problems that women face within the narrative of religion due to political, social, patriarchal, etc. influences, recent studies take a step forward in exploring the root causes of these problems and analyze the resistance portrayed by women in making their identity visible. The volume titled *Women and Asian Religions* (2017) attempts to answer questions surrounding female identity where religion serves as a constant: “How do women draw upon and/or negotiate their faith identities to address the issues they face in the changing contexts of politics, globalization, religion/spirituality, and feminism?” (Kassam xiii). The volume answers the question by looking at the lives of women in history

who negotiated a space between religion and their own identity as female members of society.

One of the chapters, recounting the story of Saradamani Chattopadhyay, explains how Sarada finds a place between divinity and her role as a female caregiver. Sarada's husband, a godman, was never intimate with her resulting in a childless marriage. On the other hand, Sarada always wanted to have children to serve the purpose of her life as a Hindu woman. After her husband's death, his disciples started following Sarada and regarded her as a goddess. Narasingha P. Sil argues that Sarada's elevation was due to her "inherent maternity" that provided her with "a creative and unorthodox path for spiritual leadership" (30, 32). By providing her service, Sarada "endeared herself to her followers through her maternal compassion expressed through the hard work of cooking and catering. She neither ... preached; [and ...] considered [it a] male prerogative. She simply delighted in mothering her devotees and disciples" (33). In doing so, Sarada was not only able to break free from the traditional Hindu role of a widow but also found a way to engage with the religious and the spiritual.

While Sarada's story is a tale of the past, recent studies conducted in the volume show that "the younger generation of Muslim women is concerned with issues of justice, gender equity, and understanding the Qur'an as they navigate gender issues (Angeles 83). This shift towards understanding the main source of religious knowledge depicts the presence of agency and the ability to challenge patriarchal notions associated with religion. Regarding Philippine Muslim women, Vivianne Angeles comments that

My interviews with Muslim women indicate that the use of the head cover is usually a woman's choice, an exercise of their agency as Muslim women... In addition to adopting what has been defined as Islamic clothing, Philippine Muslim women have also used this agency to break away from the traditional notions of women's subordination and in the quest for and promotion of their rights as Muslim women in the public square (74).

These approaches toward understanding religion place women at the center of various political and social debates that intersect with the realm of religion. The presence of women, and their resistance to the confining religious practices, not only make women a part of the global structure but also challenge one-dimensional representations of narratives that tend to place women at a position of disadvantage.

The growing importance of religion today and the need to examine literature through the lens of religion is also reflected in Sk Sagir Ali, Goutam Karmakar, and Nasima Islam's *Religion in South Asian Anglophone Literature* (2022). The editors draw attention to the theme of religion as an important factor in the political, social, and aesthetic life of South Asia. In highlighting the presence of religion at the heart of the political sphere, the book explains that

It is interesting to explore what Ranciere calls the "politics of literature," where different regimes of representations and meanings of religion along with its myth-making power are employed. For example, interpretations of religious texts like that of Manusmriti or Islamic Hadith literature give birth to certain gendered division of

roles in life for the sexes, which might better cater to a specific ideological interest, which in this case happens to be the patriarchal interests. Or, say, for example, in the Indian context, the fact that religiously motivated metaphors like that of the “Bharat Mata” that imagines the nation-state as a “Mother-goddess” with a quintessential Hindu connotation attached to it are invoked in the public imagination to demand absolute loyalty from its citizens is hard to miss (Ali et al. 4).

The purpose here is to draw attention to the profound presence of religion in South Asia that tends to take political and patriarchal inclination in literature that reflects life itself. While religion presents itself as an important categorical tool, it also becomes a way of unveiling the masked subordination of groups that seemed mundane. With the attention towards the presence of religion, questions regarding the discrepancy between its representation and actual essence will also arise.

The desire behind this collection is to contemplate the importance of religion in South Asian fictions while remaining careful of its limitations. In today’s polarized world afflicted by the hegemony of western modernity and secularism, religion is seen as a primary cause of social division, conflict, and war, while it is also argued that this is a distortion of the true significance of religion, which when properly followed promotes peace, harmony, goodwill, transcultural cosmopolitanism and social cohesion (Ali et al. 15).

Many writers who engage with the theme of religion highlight a perceived gap between religious practice and what is often considered its original or ideal form. However, this

distinction also raises critical questions about whether such a 'true' version is singular or recoverable. Acknowledging this complexity allows for new perspectives to emerge – ones that interrogate how religion intersects with structures of gender and politics, and how religious narratives are shaped, manipulated, or resisted within those frameworks. In a study conducted by Musawah called *Women's Stories, Women's Lives* (2016), scholars investigate the discrepancies that emerge between Quranic verses and their implementation. For this study, the lives of 55 million Muslim women are researched for three years to explore the famous and much-disputed concepts of *Walayah* and *Qiwamah* in the Quran.

The evidence of *Women's Stories, Women's Lives* reveals other facets of the gulf between ideals and realities. It tells us how, in practice, the traditional conceptions of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and their presumed protective and empowering aspects have been turned on their heads and used to justify male dominance and the treatment of women as perpetual minors. It shows how the *fiqh* definition of these two concepts makes women vulnerable, denying them security and dignity at different stages of their lives... For most, it was a powerful revelation to see the gap between the Qur'anic vision of marriage and gender relations and what they were told was 'Islamic', and to understand that their lives had been shaped by a mistaken belief (Mir-Hosseini 11).

The findings of the study reveal the need for reform that would bring women back to the center of the true Islamic spirit from which they have been wrongfully pushed to the periphery. While a lot of scholarship documents resistance on the part of Muslim women, it

is highly important to challenge the patriarchal definitions of Islam that tend to be the root cause of Muslim women's marginalization. With the resistance, there needs to be the development of new meanings that incorporate Muslim women into the Islamic structure that ensures their presence at the center of their religion.

Before the research for this dissertation began, the idea was to analyze religion and gender through the lens of nationalism strictly in the context of the partition of the Sub-continent. The reason for this was the nature of partition where nationalism dominated as a narrative and religion was weaved into it. It appeared that the two collectively cornered women and my dissertation was to look into those moments where nationalism and patriarchal religion became one in marginalizing women.

During this time (which was early 2019), I was also going through the process of divorce which was becoming messier with every passing day. The more I tried being firm in the decision, the more I was bombarded with religious examples and rulings that would bar me from doing so. It was a lethal and never-ending cycle in which a step forward pushed me two steps back. In my early 20s, I thought that Islam in Pakistan was not progressive because of the patriarchal hold. Living in Canada and talking to people during the time of my divorce, I realized that patriarchal Islam is a dominant version that extends beyond territorial boundaries. It did not matter whether I stayed in Pakistan or a secular Western country, the responses to my seeking divorce were similar, and I felt myself being cornered.

During the gloomy days of January as I was reading in my apartment the stories of women from partition, I realized that every woman at a certain point in time is partitioned

between what she feels and what she is told is right. Since I was already cornered by a distorted version of Islam, the only option left for me was to push my way out. My resistance came in the form of understanding my place in Islam on my own, without an intermediary. To those who told me that separation is not possible, I remind them of Barira and Mughith; to those who tell me that divorce is the most hated thing in Islam, I say, yet it is permissible.

The present version of this dissertation has a similar trajectory. I started with the belief that women are brutally marginalized by patriarchal religion and there is no way out. It is not Islam that subjugates them and places them in a container, rather people who interpret religion and make it suit their purpose. Much similar to my own story, this dissertation started with the belief that women are suffering because of this predicament, and they are stuck in the corner. Gradually I realized that just the way I pushed my way out, there must be forces of resistance in other stories too. The turning point of this dissertation is that it is not the sob story it was initially trying to be of women being marginalized by patriarchy and manipulated versions of religion. Contrary to my initial idea, it turned out to be a story of resistance that challenged false domination.

The characters in the stories reveal the reality of life where some adhere to the confinements imposed on them through patriarchal religion and traditional beliefs, whereas others deviate from the path and despite being branded as the corrupt ones, they manage to live their life instead of just surviving. Adaku embraced prostitution and that gave her the agency to educate her daughters and give them a better future. For Firdaus, understanding the politics of manipulation and exploitation of religion was, in itself, resistance. With this

understanding came the refusal to adhere to and follow the ways that would make her deny her self-worth.

My work highlights the lived reality of many women who suffer because of the manipulation of religion resulting in versions of religion and tradition that benefit patriarchy in political, social, and domestic setups. In analyzing the narratives of partition, this dissertation depicts the use of the female body in satisfying one's hatred toward the religion of the 'other'. The characters explored in certain novels depict the role of traditional values that define gender specific roles for men and women, giving men a degree of advantage and marginalizing women at the same time. The goal of this dissertation was to present this manipulation of religion as a lived reality and to examine instances of this trend in the current times. The study reveals that while there is a shift seen in the form of resistance on the part of women, many are still stuck in the same lethal cycle of marginalization. It draws attention to the urgent need to change patriarchal meanings associated with religions and the practices that place women at the periphery.

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