

## AN ISLAMIC FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE IN *THE HOLY WOMEN* BY QAISRA SHAHRAZ

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### **Abstract**

*This research emphasizes the utilization of the religion Islam as a means of enforcing patriarchal dominance and infringing against women's Islamic human rights. Islam upholds gender equality in terms of human values, however certain Muslim patriarchal societies tend to interpret Islamic teachings in a way that favors men, leading to the marginalization of Muslim women. Muslim girls are raised in accordance with the male-dominated Islamic principles, and the patriarchal social structure gradually normalizes their assigned duties as they grow into adulthood. This study contends that Muslim patriarchal communities are utilizing Islamic ideologies not in their authentic form, but rather for the advancement of patriarchal values. The instruction of Islam is primarily familial, nevertheless, in Muslim patriarchal societies, particularly in South Asia, the prevailing cultural norms are predominantly patriarchal. This study centers on the narratives of Muslim women in order to get insight into the socialization of Muslim women with respect to Islamic values. This study examines *The Holy Women* by Qaisra Shahraz to argue the challenges of patriarchal Muslim societies in upholding the Islamic human rights of Muslim women.*

### **1. Introduction**

Human beings are inherently sociable creatures who require a harmonious social environment in order to lead a fulfilling human existence. This equilibrium necessitates adherence to the established regulations. In a lamentable society, whether it is in the East or West, whether it pertains to Muslim, Christian, or Hindu communities, the disparities between men and women and the sexist implications they carry are susceptible to criticism. Societies have attributed gender disparities as the fundamental determinant of how individuals need to be treated. Men possess inherent superiority over women and hence women are expected to have a submissive existence. The Quran and Hadith provide guidelines for human beings to live their lives, making Islam a religion that emphasizes a sense of parental responsibility. For centuries, patriarchal societal structures and norms have exploited religious beliefs to oppress women. Islam is a religion that requires both men and women to adhere to societal norms. Societal conventions often devolve into stereotypes, with only women being expected to adhere to these norms. Women are held accountable for a wide range of matters, including wearing a veil, engaging in extramarital affairs, resolving property disputes, using narcotics, and even cases of rape or zina. They are subjected to punishment in all of these instances. The occurrence of these events in Islamic countries can be attributed to the misinterpretation of Islam, where it is wrongly perceived as a patriarchal system for women, although in fact Islam promotes a parental rather than a patriarchal approach. Women in Islamic communities are susceptible because of the social structures in place. These crimes against women are attributed to social conventions, which enable men to impede women's progress. Women are deprived of property rights in the social structure, as well as the rights to choose their own marriage partners and pursue education,

among other things. In Pakistan, these crimes occur due to the predominant influence of Hindu cultural norms in our society. Our culture has failed to fully embrace the actual essence of Islam, resulting in a lack of implementation of Islam as a comprehensive way of life. Instead, Islam is often selectively utilized for specific objectives. Islam mandates that both men and women actively pursue knowledge. Additionally, Islam grants women the right to own property and the autonomy to accept or decline marriage proposals. Islam does not categorize women as “Other,” but rather our society has marginalized women by denying them rights to education, marriage, employment, and property in Muslim communities. The influence of Hindu culture on our society is profound, as many of our customs and ceremonies originate from Hindu culture. The idea of the role of women in society is both similar and distinct. The Hindu religion has historically marginalized women and limited their rights within their community. The Hindu social structure is organized into five hierarchical castes, and amid these divisions, women are the most marginalized group and lack agency; they are consistently seen as outsiders. Widows face a particularly dire situation as they are excluded from society and compelled to reside in isolated locations, without the freedom to remarry and devoid of any rights whatsoever. The Hindu social structure is deeply patriarchal and does not provide women with a voice or a role; women are immolated alongside their husbands as Sati. The outcome stems from the historical utilization of religion as a means of oppressing women.

## 2. Literature Review

Leila Ahmed (1992) believes that Islam is misinterpreted due to patriarchal prejudice. Ahmed (1992) also blames colonialism for the status of Muslim women. She claims that a great deal of the problematic interpretations of Islam in the Middle East is a response to Western imperialism. Many Muslims cling to orthodox interpretations of Islam and gender relations in defiance of colonial powers as payback for attempts to subvert Islam and Arab culture and replace it with Western ideas and habits (Ahmed, 1992). Numerous Muslim feminists deal with that research that links Islam to women’s lower status in Muslim cultures. Talpade Mohanty (1984) claims that Islam’s repressiveness towards women tends to overlook the opinions of Muslim women who disagree, giving preference to the idea that moral theory and practice are primarily based on the West. Azim & Siddiqi (2011) claim that many feminist Islamic academics use the privileges granted to women at the time of Islam’s establishment as proof that God has mandated gender equality. Abbott (1941) depicts that women suffered from a loss of status in the decades before Islam as a result of neighboring countries’ adoption of patriarchal customs. According to Smith (1979), during the Jāhiliyyah period, when women’s rights were gradually vanishing, Islam prevented the further deterioration of women’s place in society by guaranteeing rights to them. Some scholars argue that using the various benefits women have enjoyed since the arrival of Islam as evidence of gender equality is simplistic and ignores the true historical context of Jāhiliyyah culture. Ahmed (1996) argues that although Islam did not invent patriarchy, it did solidify patriarchal customs in Arab culture. She further exclaims that women may have had more sexual freedom and independence in pre-Islamic civilization than they have in Islamic society. Nicolau (2014) cites several examples of self interpretations of Islamic customs that discriminate against women, including polygamy, uneven rights to divorce and marriage, and the current upsurge in efforts to free Muslim women from the faith. Nicolau and Ahmed concur that males with patriarchal mindsets have historically interpreted the foundational texts, proving that religion alone is not the only factor contributing to this gender gap.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The position of women in Muslim society is examined from a fresh perspective in Barlas's 2019 book, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. The majority of Qur'anic readers today, she argues, dictate Muslim women's social roles and the majority of Qur'anic interpretations are patriarchal. Asma Barlas (2019) believes that the Qur'an unequivocally declares men and women to be equal. The egalitarian voices within the Qur'anic text, according to Barlas (2002), are obscured or lost as a result of the patriarchal exegesis of the text and the gendered nature of human language. She also questions the patriarchal interpretation of the Islamic text. In her argument, she argues that while the Qur'an defines men and women as two complete differences rather than as two binary oppositions with men as the subject and women as the other. She does this by looking at the Qur'anic account of Creation to reinforce her point. An essential component of Qur'anic epistemology is the idea that men and women originated from a single Self and form a couple. To determine God's intended meaning, Barlas (2002) suggests reading the Qur'anic text both intra-textually and holistically. Her assertion that certain interpretations are inherent in the text emphasizes hermeneutics. She quotes Gadamer at this point, indicating that her hermeneutics are influenced by him. In addition to reading the text aloud to understand its inherent meaning, Barlas (2002) advises reading in front of the text to place it in its current context and reading behind the text to piece together the historical background surrounding the revelation or text creation. Using this methodology, Barlas (2002) concludes that the Qur'an is an egalitarian text that established the gender equality principle. Many Muslim men, for instance, comprehend Quranic verses in different ways when it comes to the verse about polygamy, as approval to engage in polygamy (4: 3). It appears that those who support polygamy are unaware of the conditions that go along with it. According to Nurlaelawati's (2013) report, in Indonesia, husbands who propose polygamy are granted permission by the courts due to their strong sexual desire. Barlas (2002) claims that this verse is not meant to have a sexual connotation, but rather that polygamy should be viewed as a restriction that should only be used in extreme circumstances (i.e. It was not meant to be primarily used to satiate sexual desire; rather, justice for orphans) is to be satisfied. Barlas (2002) offers an analysis of various Arabic verses and words, arguing that the Quran's anti-patriarchal ideology is being misunderstood due to incomplete and out-of-context interpretations. The history of Qur'anic exegesis is more than just a single, or a sequence of, instances of patriarchy because Muslims have historically understood it to support men. The history of Muslim patriarchy dates back millennia. The Qur'an does not use terms like sexual differentiation, male privilege, or father rule, but the interpretation has the politics of sexual differentiation that elevates men in their biological capacity as males.

### 4. Text Analysis

Islam holds that God considers men and women to be morally equal. Women are seen as subjects of religious discourse and custom because of the unique way that Islam and conventional patriarchy have created gender relations (Edross, 1997). In Muslim society, marriage and religion serve as the institutional foundations that shape the attitudes and actions surrounding relationships within a certain social hierarchy. The basic requirements of society are met by these institutional discourses, which offer structure, direction, and order. In a hegemonic sense, these institutions generate discourses and constitute the root of gender inequality. According to Smith (1979), Islam grants women a position of respect and dignity in addition to well defined rights

and obligations. Marriage and love are two examples of institutions in Pakistani society that have shaped discourses for both male and female genders. Because they are produced by the male wing of patriarchal society, these discourses are biased. Pakistan's social structure is extremely patriarchal, depriving women of any authority or rights, not even when it comes to making their own personal decisions. The protagonist of *The Holy Women*, Zarri Bano, is a 28-year-old woman who possesses a remarkable combination of beauty and intelligence. She is shown as independent and strong-willed. She has turned down a lot of suitors since none of them have lived up to her lofty standards. When she first meets Sikandar, her heart skips a beat because he equals her brain and reawakens her desire. Zarri's brother dies tragically, throwing off the plans for the wedding just as Sikandar is about to pop the question. Zarri's father carries on the ancient tradition of the Shahzadi Ibadat, or Holy Woman, a woman committed to studying the Holy Quran and leading a chaste life.

According to Arkoun (1994), the Qur'an has been repeatedly re-contextualized in many cultures, yielding to the ideological demands of various players. This has allowed patriarchal monopolies to persist. In her book *The Holy Women*, Qaisra Shahraz describes a lady who seems comfortable with her family's masculine supremacy, taking it for granted and surrendering her goals and future for her love. The main character in Shahraz's novel is Zarri Bano. She is helpless and yields to her father and grandfather's severe decisions, even though she is active in the women's group at the university. Her father was a feudal landlord and a person of authority. After his only son dies, he decides to make his loving daughter a holy woman. The feudal inhabitants of Sindh province still adhere to this antiquated tradition. Since the daughters were the primary means by which the feudal lords acquired their power through their ownership of hundreds of thousands of acres of land, the main objective of this ritual is to prevent family property from leaving the family. They have total power over their ladies from the moment of birth till death. Feudal rulers profit from the constant exchange of women for material gains through marriage. Coleman (2012) illustrates how patriarchy and religious conservatism have historically and internationally conspired against women, with a focus on the modern Middle East. Gender segregation, severe consequences for perceived infractions, and limited public responsibilities for women have all been justified and enforced in part by religious perspectives on women. The book's title also suggests how the woman transforms into the Holy Woman. Islam rejects the custom of marriage based on self interpretation of the Holy Quran, which is practiced by the majority of Sandhis. Zarri Bano's life is exactly the same as other ignorant women who live their lives under the control of their male relatives, despite the fact that she is educated. The Holy Woman by Qaisra Shahraz is a highly complicated and diversified examination of Islamic ideology and role transition because of its multifaceted, disputed, and sociocultural features. The dilemma of female identity and the distinction between women as animals and genders persist in today's culture. Her position and role in relation to her freedom and equality of rights remain unclear.

In Shahraz's portrayal of Pakistani society, women are portrayed as being stifled in their uniqueness and independence by their marriages. According to Al-Dulaim, Y. K. O. (2021), Shaw made similar observations on the marriage system and the oppression of women in his play *Getting Married* (1908), stating that the law is so irrational and inhumane that it is practically an abomination. They are constantly reminded that they are not independent and that their fathers and spouses are the ones who actually determine their fate. Wives' physical and psychological

abuse has corrupted the idea of marriage in Pakistani society. A marriage should ideally be a union of love and mutual understanding. In the novel, the weight of outdated customs and traditions as well as the influence of Zarri Bano's father pose a threat to her identity and uniqueness. She has been portrayed by Shahraz as a woman who must put aside her individuality in order to uphold her family's honor and tradition. Zarri Bano is portrayed in stereotypes as a defenseless subaltern whose fate is in the hands of others. Her intelligent, liberal façade is revealed to be a façade when, in her own house, she becomes a puppet. Another important thing to note is that Zarri Bano's marriage is the main source of conflict for the family right from the beginning of the book. It stands for her lack of personality and identity as well as the way that a man determines who she really is. Zarri Bano has personally witnessed the stifled way of life married women lead, especially her mother's seclusion at home. Shahraz's critique of matters pertaining to marriage is seen in Zarri Bano's remark to Sikander that marriage is just like any other part of life. "Marriage is a social institution on par with all other aspects of existence," Zarri Bano tells Sikander, expressing Shahraz's critique of marriage-related concerns. Marriage can require more sacrifice in our patriarchal society than you can possibly see me making (p. 125). One may compare the relationship between Habib and Shahzada to that of a puppet and puppeteer. Shahzada is a puppet, and her husband is a puppeteer who can control his wife's fate. Shahzada's spouse has psychologically crippled her. Habib, her husband, takes advantage of Zarri Bano's maternal love when he wants to turn her into a holy woman. Her grandfather and father are never challenged in their authority to mold her identity as they see suitable.

Habib Khan is the ultimate decision-maker and can make any decision pertaining to his children's lives. One of Habib Khan's most notable personal traits is his unwavering devotion and infatuation with his kid. After his son dies, he gets furious and decides, without talking to his daughter, to marry the Holy Quran. Additionally, he asserts that he dislikes Zarri Bano's decision to wed Sikander and that, after discovering Sikander's love, he made it for the benefit of his daughter. Habib Khan is happy with his decision despite realizing that it is very severe and man-controlling. This is a common method used by parents to emotionally influence their daughters to agree with the decisions made. Women must be given the freedom to stand up for themselves and their rights. They must have the ability to protect themselves, but in Pakistan, this is not the case. To get the ultimate go-ahead for the Zarri Bano case, Habib Khan visits Siraj Din, the head of the family described in the book. Siraj Din is a unique type of man. He informs him that their inheritance and Zarri Bano are the topics of conversation. According to Geetha (2009), a man's traits can be changed from being condescending, oppressive, and biased toward a particular gender to being polite and compassionate. Gove (2004) claims that the character Sikander from Qiasra Shahbaz's novel, where the male character takes on an unusual position, is an example of this kind of transformation in a gender stereotype regarding men. In addition to becoming furious, Sikandar tries to stop Zarri Bano and convince her to change her mind after she is referred to as a holy woman. Though some males go beyond these preconceptions and do not see women as less than human, male members typically feel in control and superior to other female members. They think there should be no discrimination in this area between men and women.

## 5. Conclusion

In Muslim patriarchal societies, the rights of women depend on a number of factors. The main component is self-interpretation of religion that affects every aspect of life in Muslim patriarchal societies. The second factor is society wherein the Ulama are vehemently against gender

equality. Women are treated and perceived as second-class citizens because of patriarchal social norms and laws. Men play a very dominant role in the home and have total control over their wives or daughters. Females are supposed to obey their male guardians. The third element is the patriarchal governments. For example, the strict observance of the Purdah regime is encouraged by Saudi Arabia's cultural environment. Paternal first cousins and other related relatives have traditionally married. It is customary for parents, mothers, and other relatives to plan weddings, and it is customary for potential partners to not meet before the wedding. There is a trend toward fewer marriages between close relatives and increased communication between the couple prior to the wedding, even though these traditions are gradually and unevenly changing. Parents still arrange marriages, but they are more likely to do so quietly and covertly. Muslim patriarchal societies are restricted in many aspects of their lives by their familial context, which extends to marriage. The women do not take part in deciding on the details of their marriages. The marriage contract is officially signed by the parent of the prospective bride and the husband.

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