

Mukhamadiev Timur Urazovich
 Teacher of Foreign philology faculty,
 Termez State University, Republic of Uzbekistan

FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF QAISRA SHEHRAZ'S NOVEL THE HOLY WOMEN

***Abstract.** Gender stereotypes are the mind sets of the society practiced years after years. Men and women are assigned gender roles according to these already set patterns. As a result of practicing these gender stereotypes, women are assigned weaker position as compared to men. This paper is aimed at challenging the gender stereotypes and highlighting the emancipation of women in the backdrop of the views presented by the feminists and the gender theorists. The text of Qaisra Shehraz's novel, *The Holy Woman*, is analyzed in milieu of the feminist and gender theories.*

***Keywords:** Feminism, Gender Stereotypes, the Other.*

Introduction

Men and women both conform to the traditional gender roles assigned by their society. These stereotyped roles are practiced for ages. Traditionally, historically and socially women are given weaker position in society. These gender stereotypes are transmitted generation after generation. Even in today's global world, women are deprived of their due rights and they are still being oppressed. Feminists and gender theorists are raising their voice to end discrimination against women. This paper is a study of a Pakistani female novelist, Qaisra Shehraz's novel, *The Holy Woman*, within the viewpoints of a few feminists and gender theorists. Gender stereotypes are challenged here and women emancipation is emphasized.

Textual Analysis of *The Holy Woman*

Qaisra Shahraz, a Pakistani woman novelist, is a feminist and writes about issues of women. Her novel, *The Holy Woman*, is a story of Zarri Bano and tells us how she was trapped in the hands of the patriarchal oppression and how she emerges as an independent woman at the end.

The notable major and minor male characters in this novel are: Sikander Din- the central male character, Habib Khan - Zarri Bano's father, Siraj Din- Habib's father, Ibrahim Musa - a man in Cairo and Khawer - a landlord.

Savitt views that men are given powerful roles and authoritative positions. Likewise Beauvoir says that women accept as it is the roles given to them by men. This novel shows evidence of this traditional gender biased roles of men and women. Habib Khan, a landlord, proves to be a traditional gender biased man who after the death of his only son, wants to sacrifice his daughter in the name of religion and decides a very cruel destiny for her to become a Holy Woman of his clan and inherit all his property, remaining unmarried throughout her life. He knows that Zarri Bano, a very good looking and well educated woman of 27 years, an active member of feminist movement who wants to establish her own publishing company in Karachi and also wants to marry Sikander, her lover - a handsome business tycoon from Karachi. Yet Habib Khan marries her off to the Holy Quran. His patriarchal thinking is presented in the novel where he declares that he is the head of the family and he will decide what is good for his Zarri Bano. Then he informs his wife that he has not liked Sikander although Shahzada, his wife has told him that Zarri Bano wants to marry him. Habib Khan's patriarchal approach also comes to the surface when he informs his wife about his decision that he is going to talk with his father, Siraj Din, about Zarri Bano's becoming a Shahzadi Ibadat: A Holy Woman. When Zarri Bano resists at his decision telling him that she has accepted Sikander's proposal and has decided to marry him, he then refuses to fulfill her desire and very harshly tells her that there will be no marriage ceremony for her as he will never grant permission to her to marry this man or any other man. Habib Khan's role is of a traditional gender biased man thus proving the concepts given by Savitt and Beauvoir.

Whether a text is masculine or feminine depends upon the space given to male or female characters, respectively. The novel under analysis shows that the main character is a female - Zarri Bano and there are more female characters and their stories than there are male characters and their stories. So this novel is a representation of femininity. Ali Ahmed Kharal, in his article, "The Holy Woman: A Feminist Perspective" says that QairsaShahraz has successfully brought the female protagonists to the centre-stage and these female main characters serve as a means of consciousness-raising in the female segment of society [11]. Next, he asserts that in The Holy Woman, QairsaShahraz seeks to contribute to the process of change that has already started all over the world that is the reconsideration of

women's rights and status. He draws his conclusion that the female characters of this novel have a will and life of their own by cutting loose the constraints imposed by the gender discrimination thus Qaisra Shahraz wishes to build a world free of gender bias.

Conclusion

The text analysis of the novel, *The Holy Woman*, provides evidence of the changed gender roles and challenges the stereotypes of a male taking a variety of roles and a female just taking the limited roles; a male being confident, bold, brave, independent, rational, reserve, dominant and the like while a female being shy, submissive, emotional, obedient, and so on. Zarri and Shahzada show obedience and submissiveness at an early phase but later on they emerge as confident, authoritative, independent and dominant individuals. Sikander, Musa and Khawer openly express their feelings and emotions of love. Zarri on the other hand shows very reserve and cold behaviour. Finally, she becomes totally free to make her own choices and she is always busy in religious and educational activities, serving and educating the Muslim women of her society. Fatima and Naimat Bibi are other examples of the changed gender roles as they are working women and live independently.

Analysis of the male and the female characters in this novel has revealed that there is stereotyping of male and female characters and gender-biasedness as seen in the main characters of Siraj Din, Habib Khan, Zarri Bano and Shahzada. They all take the traditional roles at one point or the other yet they change in the course of events. There is also challenging of gender stereotypes when we look at Sikander, Musa and Khawer. They are all young people - modern, well-educated, liberal and unbiased whereas Siraj Din and Habib Khan are older people having their gender-biases and conservative attitude but not to the full extent as they have provided Zarri Bano some kind of freedom to get University level education while staying away from home. Thus this novel reveals the fact that change is taking place in society as a result of globalization, education and awareness.

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