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Depiction of Pakistani Culture and Experiences of Pakistani Women in Nafisa Rizvi's Novel "THE BLUE ROOM"

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Abstract

The following research bounds to represent the typical Pakistani culture highlighted in the novel "The Blue Room" by Nafisa Rizvi. Rizvi's portrayal captures the essence of cultural richness, shedding light on the diverse facets that shape Pakistani society. The novel delves into the intricacies of Pakistani culture, offering a nuanced exploration that goes beyond surface perceptions. The research has been conducted through a qualitative approach which allows for in-depth analysis of the characters and thematic elements present within socio- socio-cultural contexts of Pakistan. The research data has been collected through primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes the text of the novel "The Blue Room" while secondary sources include several interviews, reports magazines, etc. The theoretical framework used in the novel is social constructivism, according to which, individuals construct meaning through social interactions. The analysis of the novel unfolds the story where the title, "The Blue Room" serves as a metaphorical space where characters grapple with identity, relationships, and the evolving landscape of Pakistan explaining patriarchy, feudalism , domestic violence, and societal pressure. Through the narrative, Rizvi skillfully navigates the complexities of societal norms, familial dynamics, and the intersection of tradition with modernity. This research explores how "Blue Room" serves as a literary lens, providing readers with a deeper understanding of the cultural tapestry woven into the fabric of contemporary Pakistan.

Keywords: Blue, patriarchy, feudalism, gender roles, violence, stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The research is about the novel "The Blue Room" by Nafisa Rizvi. The story of the plot reveals the protagonist, Zaib-un-Nisa, who grows up in Shahi Manzil and is an insightful girl. The detailed analysis of the novel provides many instances that are reflective of Pakistani culture and society.

Nafisa Rizvi is a Pakistani writer and curator. She is famous for writing several publications locally and internationally such as Imprint Australia and Art Asia Pacific. She delivered a lecture

at the College of Fine Art in Sydney, Australia in 2013. She also took part in a printmaking residency. One of her novels, "The Blue Room" is a masterpiece depicting social and cultural issues that are present in Pakistan published in 2009.

The title of the novel, "The Blue Room" holds much significance. From a psychological perspective, the blue colour manifests different emotions. It represents calmness and hope as well as royal blood. Royal people are considered as blue blooded which is why it indicates the rich royal people of Shahi Manzil. On the other hand, the blue colour also represents the state of depression and despair. In the novel, the power of the blue colour cannot be denied. The meanings of the blue colour can vary depending upon the cultures and circumstances. It is often associated with depth and stability. Blue colour even stands for negative light and traditionally stands for sorrow and depression. The protagonist of the novel, Zaib-un-Nisa returns to the blue room after she comes to know that she is getting married to a person she doesn't even know. It leaves her insecure to the core. She declares 'blue walls' as 'blue friends.'

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- To analyze the novel from the perspective of Pakistani society
- To present the drawbacks of feudalism as a social system in Pakistan
- To highlight the problems of Pakistani women in Patriarchal society
- To discuss the societal pressure that restricts women's choices and ambitions

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research includes the following Questions:

- How the novel The Blue Room is reflective of Pakistani society and culture?
- What are the common problems that women face in Pakistani society?
- What are the typical stereotypes and gender roles that are assigned to women in our society?
- How does the novel portray religious hypocrisy and exploitation present in Pakistani society?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The following research is significant because the author has portrayed typical Pakistani society in the novel and various factors that contribute to social and cultural issues such as arranged marriages, harassment, domestic violence, and patriarchy that are prevailing in Pakistani conservative society. Social and cultural issues arising from the very start of the novel show how poverty is embedded in the place while there is a brilliance of architecture occurring in the bourgeoisie's place.

RESEARCH GAP

The novel "The Blue Room" is a recent novel which is published in 2009. It depicts the experiences of women who are subjected to various social issues and no one has performed any thoughtful research on this novel. There is a larger research gap that's why the topic has been selected to analyze all the social issues that are highlighted in Pakistani society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of gender roles in Pakistani literature has emerged as a recurring motif, serving as a reflection of the ever-changing dynamics within society. Scholars, like Grünenfelder (2013), have extensively examined the portrayal of women in Pakistani literary works. These works frequently feature women in traditional positions, as they navigate society expectations and confront the difficulties of reconciling personal desires with established standards. The existing body of literature also demonstrates a sophisticated comprehension of gender, highlighting the tenacity and fortitude exhibited by women when confronted with challenging circumstances (Shahnaz, Fatima, & Qadir, 2020). Contemporary literary figures actively engage in the ongoing dialogue by extensively examining the intricate aspects of feminine identity and femininity, while also digging into themes of self-exploration and the quest for personal uniqueness (Chaudary, 2013). Furthermore, scholarly literature offers a discerning perspective on the societal and political standing of women, delving into the issues of gender disparity and bias (Farah, Bukhari, & Ramzan, 2013).

To comprehensively analyze the depiction of women in Pakistani literature, it is imperative to critically assess the merits and constraints inherent in the portrayal of female characters (Ahmed, 2009). From a favorable perspective, it is noteworthy that contemporary literature originating from Pakistan has made notable advancements in presenting intricate and diverse portrayals of women. According to Yasmeen and Chawla (2020), the portrayal of women in literature has been enriched by the contributions of authors like Kamila Shamsie and Bapsi Sidhwa. These authors have effectively depicted women as multifaceted beings who possess agency, resilience, and a wide range of experiences. These narratives frequently present a critique of conventional gender roles, providing readers with a more nuanced comprehension of the experiences of women in Pakistani society. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that certain literary or artistic creations may continue to propagate stereotypical representations or confine female characters to conventional societal positions. Furthermore, it is imperative to further prioritize the concept of intersectionality to effectively acknowledge and address the multifaceted experiences of women, taking into account many characteristics such as socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and geographical location. The scholarly analysis of Pakistani literature needs to promote ongoing advancement in the authentic depiction of women, while avoiding simplistic characterizations and cultivating a more comprehensive narrative that reflects the multifaceted nature of women's encounters in Pakistan (Mehmood et al., 2021).

Nafisa Rizvi demonstrates a nuanced portrayal of Pakistani women in her storytelling, focusing on the complexities and challenges they encounter. The characters within her narratives embody the multifaceted experiences of women in Pakistani society (Kamran, 2021). The exploration of a woman's sharp instincts, as seen in unease towards seemingly respectable individuals, suggests an examination of women's intuition and their ability to discern underlying danger. Additionally, narratives involving divorce and enduring adversity highlight themes of resilience and strength in the face of societal struggles. Rizvi delves into the broader societal

issues surrounding gender roles, contributing to a more intricate and realistic depiction of women's experiences in the cultural context she explores (Farah, Bukhari, & Ramzan, 2013).

In her work "The Blue Room," Nafisa Rizvi adeptly constructs a narrative that delves into the deep dynamics of Pakistani women's lives within the context of a traditional and secluded extended family structure. The narrative takes place in a haveli, where the story revolves around Zaib-un-nisa, a perceptive and extraordinary little girl. She encounters a society deeply rooted in feudal customs, opulence, and the surrounding legends. The story has a notable facet in its depiction of the constrained prospects available to women, as seen by the limitation on their access to school. Rizvi's portrayal of a closely interconnected society highlights the limited opportunities available to women such as Zaib-un-nisa, who are constrained by societal expectations rather than being able to pursue their dreams. The denial of educational opportunities serves as a symbolic manifestation of the wider obstacles encountered by women in Pakistan, hence perpetuating existing gender inequities and limitations on their autonomy (Jamal, Ahmad and Mian, 2023).

The author additionally illuminates the susceptibility of women inside the household framework. The incident involving Zaib-un-nisa's maternal uncle's indecent approaches serves as a poignant reminder of the disconcerting prevalence of familial betrayals and the absence of safeguards for women, even within their immediate family. This story provides a devastating analysis of the widespread problem of abuse and exploitation experienced by women, frequently perpetrated by individuals entrusted with parental responsibilities (Jamal, Ahmad and Mian, 2023). Moreover, Rizvi extensively explores the problem of coerced unions, a pervasive concern throughout numerous conventional communities. The expeditious union of Zaib-un-nisa with an elderly gentleman whom she has never encountered accentuates the limited autonomy frequently encountered by women inside such matrimonial agreements. The tale elucidates the difficulties she encounters in navigating contentious relationships with her in-laws and safeguarding her loved ones, all while grappling with a marriage that was forced upon her without her consent. This depiction highlights the challenging circumstances experienced by numerous women who are obliged to get into marriages that are determined by societal norms rather than their own volition.

The inclusion of Zaib-un-nisa's sister as a character in the narrative serves to deepen the complexity of the story, shedding light on the oppressive treatment experienced by women within the familial context. The manifestation of abusive conduct exhibited by the spouse of her sister, motivated by his unlawful attraction towards a sex worker, serves as an illustration of the pervasive presence of toxic masculinity within the societal framework portrayed in the literary work. The narrative presented in this context functions as a critical examination of the widespread misogyny that can result in the ill-treatment of women, even inside the revered establishment of matrimony. When confronted with these obstacles, Zaib-un-nisa is faced with a crucial choice that will not only determine her future but also have consequences for others who rely on her. The author adeptly examines the psychological conflicts experienced by the protagonist, prompting inquiry into her potential to overcome societal limitations and exercise

autonomy in pursuit of her aspirations. In her work titled "The Blue Room," Nafisa Rizvi presents a sad and intellectually stimulating depiction of Pakistani women, delving into the intricacies of their existence, challenges, and the cultural expectations that confine them. The story functions as a compelling critique of the necessity for introspection and societal transformation to empower women, enabling them to surpass the constraints imposed by traditional and patriarchal frameworks (Jamal, Ahmad and Mian, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a qualitative approach which allows for an in-depth analysis of the characters and the thematic elements present in Nafisa Rizvi's novel *The Blue Room* within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. The research utilizes the qualitative method to delve deeper into human experiences and social phenomena and allows for the exploration of complex social and cultural issues, such as the ills of feudalism, the unfounded beliefs and customs of rural societies, exploitation in the name of religion and gender-related issues in Pakistan. The research has been carried out by collecting and analyzing qualitative data to gain an understanding of individuals' social reality which includes an understanding of their attitudes, beliefs and motivations.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for conducting this research has been gathered from primary as well as secondary sources. The primary source of data collection is exclusively the text of the novel *The Blue Room* by Nafisa Rizvi. A comprehensive reading and detailed analysis of the novel has been carried out to get an insight into "how" the writer's portrayal of the themes, characters, symbols, and stylistic choices employed in the narrative help to identify and interpret elements related to Pakistani culture, the depiction of the societal norms and the representation of gender roles in Pakistani society.

The secondary data for carrying out the research has been collected through scholarly articles, literary magazines and journals, relevant reports, author's interviews, and various authentic websites and encyclopedias. These sources have provided additional insights into the socio-cultural aspects and challenges faced by women in Pakistan. Moreover, some reliable historical documents and cultural artifacts have also been consulted to contextualize and compare the cultural values and experiences of Pakistani women in different periods with those depicted in the novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social constructivist approach has been adopted as the theoretical framework that underpins this research. The theory of social constructivism, given by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky in 1968, suggests that individuals actively construct meaning, knowledge and reality through social interactions, cultural frameworks and shared experiences rather than passively receiving it from the outside world. The theory posits that cultural norms, values and beliefs influence individuals' interpretation and construction of knowledge. The social contexts, unique perspectives and experiences of individuals shape their beliefs, perceptions and

understanding of the world. The theory also focuses on language as a crucial tool for constructing and negotiating shared meanings and understandings (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). The theory of social constructivism has been applied to the novel *The Blue Room* to analyze how the different characters in the narrative construct their realities, identities, and perceptions of the world around them. The research focuses on how their interactions, societal expectations and cultural influences shape their beliefs and actions. The characters' social interactions have been examined and analyzed, looking at the power dynamics, social hierarchies and the influence of societal norms on these interactions. The research has further highlighted how the novel portrays the construction of gender roles and identities within the Pakistani society being depicted in the novel. It examines how societal expectations influence the characters' understanding of gender and their roles as men and women.

Overall, this research adopts the cultural studies approach to textual analysis that examines how the novel reflects and critiques cultural norms, traditions and societal values within the Pakistani context, and investigates how cultural elements influence characters' behaviors, relationships and decision-making processes. Moreover, the research highlights the instances where characters challenge or subvert the established societal norms and expectations, and explores how these instances contribute to the deconstruction or reconstruction of social realities within the narrative. Thus, the social constructivist framework has been adopted as the basis for conducting this research to explore how cultural norms, gender roles, and societal expectations have been constructed and negotiated within the novel.

RESEARCH METHOD

Catherine Belsey's approach to textual analysis has been utilized in conducting this research. Catherine Belsey (1940-2021) is a prominent British cultural theorist who is known for her work in literary theory and cultural studies. Her approach to textual analysis, taken from her book *Critical Practice* (Belsey, 2002), largely revolves around deconstructing texts to uncover the underlying power structures and ideologies they express. Her work heavily draws from poststructuralism, focusing on how language and meaning are interconnected and shaped by power relations. Belsey emphasizes the importance of critically examining texts to reveal how they construct and reinforce cultural norms, values, and power dynamics, highlighting the role of language and representation in shaping our understanding of the world.

By applying Catherine Belsey's approach to textual analysis, the research has examined the text of *The Blue Room* for the underlying power structures, ideologies, and the role of language and cultural contexts in constructing meaning within the narrative. The research explores how language is used to construct identities, relationships and societal norms. It looks at how the characters' dialogues, descriptions and interactions contribute to the portrayal of power dynamics, social hierarchies and cultural values within the novel. Following Belsey's approach, the research has uncovered the ideologies and implicit messages conveyed through the text by examining how the characters' behaviors, choices and societal expectations reflect or challenge the prevailing ideologies regarding gender, class and other societal constructs. The

broader cultural, historical and social contexts in which the novel is situated have been kept in mind while conducting this research.

ANALYSIS

The Blue Room by Nafisa Rizvi reflects Pakistani society, culture, and experiences of Pakistani women. The setting of the novel "Shahi Manzil", in Jahangir Abad, is a prominent Pakistani haveli where traditional and strict, "Since the family was so tight-lipped about their private affairs"(4), Pakistani family lives. It depicts a patriarchal rural life where men are dominant. The social system in Jahangir Abad is feudalism, as Shahi Manzil itself composes 85 acres of land drawing the attention of the readers towards the Sindhi feudal system. Jahangir Abad depicts a rural lifestyle where the jirga system, which does not include women's voices, is still present in many tribal areas of Pakistan. Many other problems that exist in a feudal system are present in the novel, i.e., when Ayaz goes on a trip, his host tells him about peasant problems. Moreover, the proletariats are being abused by the landlords as in the case of Sheikh Akbar's treatment of his workers, especially female workers.

The novel is interesting as it covers topics and issues familiar to most of the people in Pakistan. It provides insight into the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society where women have to conform to the expectations of society and family. The novel presents traditional gender roles assigned to women. Even Qurat-ul-Ain, an authoritative woman who takes charge of the household matters after Khan Bahadur Ali's death, has to conform to society's traditional norms, as it is written, "She was a lady of few words and divided her day equally between her duty, her family, and prayer"(23). The novel shows that societal pressure often restricts women's choices, ambitions, aspirations, dreams, and personal independence. In Shahi Manzil, in the name of the cultural and traditional norm, women are not allowed to go outside of the house, they are not allowed to go to schools; whereas, men receive their education from prestigious institutes. The protagonist of the novel "Zaibunissa" mostly known as "Zaib" is also not allowed to go to school for which she never forgives his father. The narrator says, "But Zaib was not so lucky and was not awarded an equitable education, not for any lack of life but more in keeping with the norms of the day which did not allow for the educational advancement of the girl-child"(46). Through the protagonist's journey, the novel highlights the immense societal pressure that Pakistani women often face in terms of marriage, in the form of arranged marriage, and family. Zaib's father decides her marriage, without her consent, with Murtaza. She is being treated as a scapegoat as her family has to pay the debt of Saadat Ali Khan to the Murtaza family. Her mother says, "We have a debt to Murtaza's family that has to be settled" (120).

The Blue Room also highlights domestic violence which women even today face in many parts of the country. Zainab marries an older landlord 'Shah Baqar Mirza'. Her family arranges her marriage, "Her parents had hoped that a mature and world-wise man would be able to handle her bad temper and perhaps even calm her to some degree"(34). After marriage, Zainab changes as she mellows and begins to be more courteous to her in-laws. However, Mirza proves to be a different person. He drinks and has extramarital affairs. When she gives birth to her son 'Ayaz', Mirza does not come or even send a congratulatory message. As a result, Zainab suffers

from post-partum depression. Her husband shows an inhumane attitude towards her which makes her fight with him. Mirza beats her severely, as the narrator says, "She was like a rag doll being punched and kicked and slapped until she finally lost her consciousness"(42). And their relationship ends with divorce.

Moreover, Zaib's in-laws symbolize typical Pakistani in-laws. They treat her badly. Her mother-in-law accuses her and mocks her for her age as she looks older than her age. Zaib does not want to go back to her in-laws. She says, "My life is passing me by and I can't sit around waiting. I feel like Pozzo and Lucky waiting interminably for Godot"(261). She wants to go to the city and wants to read; however, as happens in our tribal areas, Qurat-ul-Ain opposes leaving their roots. She says, "If you cut yourself off from your roots, you will bleed! Your children will wander on the earth not knowing where to build their homes or bury their deaths"(276).

Harassment, another issue in Pakistani society, is present in the novel. Zaib's cousin 'Adil' harasses her. Lastly, Exploitation in the name of religion is also common in Pakistani society. In the novel, religious hypocrisy is blatantly portrayed through the character of the lecherous Maulvi Jalal and fraudulent Maulvi Tameezuddin 'PirSaheb'. Maulvi Jalal rapes a boy named 'Salar' in a religious place and later kills him. Moreover, he is a black magician and a misogynist.

DISCUSSION

The examination of "The Blue Room" by Nafisa Rizvi reveals a striking portrayal of Pakistani society, deftly illustrating the many facets of social conventions and cultural subtleties. The research objectives that were stated at the beginning of the study are adequately addressed by this examination. The novel presents a rich tapestry of themes that deeply resonate with the research objectives when viewed through a lens that is precisely calibrated to the social difficulties ingrained in Pakistani society. The story is a heartbreaking mirror reflecting the state of society, delving into the complexities of arranged marriages, the harsh reality of domestic abuse, and the limitations of patriarchy.

The novel makes a distinctive addition when one compares and contextualizes these findings with the body of literature already written about Pakistani literature. Within the field of Pakistani literature, Rizvi's story gives the continuing discussion on gender dynamics and societal forces more depth and dimension. With its complex view on societal expectations, familial restraints, and the difficult battles faced by women in adhering to traditional norms, the work serves as a monument to the change of gender roles. By exposing facets of domestic unrest, highlighting the nuances of discrimination based on gender, and exploring the consequences of deeply ingrained cultural preconceptions, it enhances the body of literature.

This study's importance rests in its capacity to uncover hitherto undiscovered areas of Pakistani literature's narrative terrain. In addition to defining the social fabric, "The Blue Room" is an engaging tool that reveals the complex webs of suppression and resiliency that are woven across the lives of its protagonists. The novel's representation of the complex web of social concerns that permeate Pakistani culture highlights how relevant it is in offering a thorough depiction of societal limits and significantly advancing knowledge of social norms and cultural nuances.

Although this analysis fills a major research gap for in-depth studies on "The Blue Room," it is important to recognize the limits of the study. Although strong, the qualitative technique may have shortcomings in terms of fully encapsulating the complex web of societal issues that the novel portrays. Furthermore, interpreting the results with caution is necessary because the use of secondary sources in addition to the primary text may introduce biases or restrict the scope of the research.

The ramifications of this study go beyond the scope of this investigation, encouraging more research to uncover the many levels that are hidden within "The Blue Room." Different methodological frameworks could be used in later research to support and enhance the conclusions uncovered in this investigation. Furthermore, a more comprehensive study project might cover a wider range of thematic components in the book, enhancing our comprehension of the subtleties of Pakistani society as they are captured in Rizvi's moving story.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has been conducted to find out how *The Blue Room* by Nafisa Rizvi is reflective of Pakistani culture and the experiences of Pakistani women. The researchers have used 'Social Constructivism' as a lens for this study. The primary data source for this research is the novel *The Blue Room*. The researchers have employed a qualitative approach which allowed for an in-depth analysis of the thematic elements present in the novel. Analysis of the data shows that the traditional extended family is living in a traditional Pakistani haveli 'Shahi Manzil', located in Jahangir Abad. The societal system in Jahangir Abad is feudalism which is still prominent in many tribal areas of Pakistan. In this societal system, landlords own big chunks of land which leads more people to live below the poverty line. Moreover, the jirga system which does not include women's voices is also present in many tribal areas of the country.

The novel provides an insight into the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society where women have to conform to the expectations of society and family. The novel reveals the immense pressure placed on Pakistani women to uphold the honor and reputation of their families. It also shows the societal limitations that stifle their aspirations, choices, ambitions, and dreams. It presents traditional gender roles assigned to women and societal expectations that demand women to endure silently rather than openly challenge the status quo. Through the journey of the protagonist of the novel, Zaib, the novel highlights the immense societal pressures that Pakistani women often face in terms of marriage and family.

The novel also highlights domestic violence which women even today, in many parts of the country, face. Zainab's husband beats her badly as she fights with her when she suffers from post-partum depression. Harassment, another issue that women in Pakistani society face is also present in the novel as Zaib's cousin 'Adil' badly touches her. Moreover, exploitation in the name of religion is also present in Pakistani society. In the novel, religious hypocrisy is portrayed through Maulvi Jalal and Maulvi Tameezuddin's 'PirSaheb'. Maulvi Jalal is a rapist who rapes a boy named 'Salar' in a religious place and later kills him.

This research can be further improved by consulting more secondary data. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of Pakistani women's further experiences could be done by analyzing primary

data thoroughly. Further research could be done by analyzing the novel through the lens of 'New Woman' as Rizvi somehow, at the end of the novel, subverts the traditional female role through the character of Zaib. Moreover, there should be a clear comparison and contrast between the experiences of female characters in the novel and the experiences of women in Pakistani society to portray the actual problems women are facing in society.

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