

Covid-19 and Literary Resistance in Pakistan: A Feminist Analysis of *The Stained-Glass Window*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the stories of women impacted by COVID-19 and narrated by Pakistani writers. The discussion is primarily based on flash fiction from a recent anthology entitled, *The Stained-Glass Window* (2020). I critically analyse selected short stories in the context of the cultural taboos (such as, patriarchy, sexism, biological essentialism), historically thrust upon Pakistani women. The analysis is based on the lives of the female protagonists (irrespective of their age, class, race, ethnicity, or religious differences) and their experiences during multiple lockdowns in Pakistan. This textual analysis is presented in the light of Kate Millet's theoretical framework (Millet 1990) to contend that these Pakistani writers resist the deepening sexual politics through fictional characters evidently strengthening the contemporary feminist resistance emerging from Pakistan. The paper is primarily concerned with the issues of sexual politics (Millet 24), 'internal colonization' and gender-based power dynamics (25) experienced by women during the pandemic in the light of feminist resistance in Pakistan.*

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, women, Pakistani, health, Postcolonial, lockdown, feminist, sexual politics.

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Experiencing COVID-19, one is forced to reflect on the following overarching questions that this paper aims to address: What does the experience teach us? What does it mean to be human during a major biological crisis like the coronavirus pandemic? How can our economic, social, and cultural achievements and challenges suddenly take a back seat to the sheer physical fact of disease, contagion, and death? What can the humanities (the study of what it means to be human) offer to help us survive such a trauma? From the perspective of literature, more relevant questions may be, can pandemic literature reflect the deadly manifestations of humanity? My focus on Pakistani fiction produced in the context of the pandemic aims to address some of these crucial questions by narrowing down the focus on the impact that it had on the lives of women and how this is depicted in the recent fiction produced by Pakistani writers.

‘Plague Literature’, or ‘Pandemic Literature’ has been actively contributed by writers across the world depending on specific historical phases and contexts. The limited responses by Anglophone Pakistani writers are important contribution in the backdrop of COVID-19. It is significant to mention that the escalating problems of domestic violence, sexual abuse, child abuse and harassment in South Asia and Pakistan vary from the rest of the world. Hence, this paper specifically responds to the context-based problems of women while regarding the fiction produced by Pakistani writers as a reflection of their lives.

In an article entitled, “How Literature can Capture the Essence of Life in a Pandemic” Tyler Stoval comments on the tragic illnesses and deaths because of COVID-19 and how humanities disciplines have played a dominating role when it comes to dealing with the trauma of pandemic. In Stoval’s view, literature presents a more ‘intimate’ view because ‘We are the stories we tell, and in a time of pandemic, these stories show how we will live through this crisis and, ultimately, build a brighter tomorrow’ (Stoval n.p.). Based on a similar assertion, this paper uses textual analysis of post-COVID-19 Pakistani fiction as a research method. I rely on ‘extra-textual knowledge’ rather than ‘pure reading’ of these texts (Griffin 163). Textual analysis is approached as a reader’s relation with the text that engages in a dialogue with the reader by inviting a certain kind of response (Griffin 165). Hence, the meanings are explored through symbols, sounds, images, (Griffin 162) to create a meaning centered around both, the consequences of the pandemic and the feminist concerns of Pakistani writers.

Faraz Talat's novella *74: Seventy Four* (2020) is the point of entry in this discussion. The purpose is to connect Talat's discussion with the broader feminist concerns expressed by various Pakistani writers later through the examples of selected short stories edited by Sana Munir and Taha Kehar (2021) as a primary source. The key objective of this paper is to apply a feminist approach on these stories to contend that the pandemic has worsened the already active patriarchal structures operating within the Pakistani society. The consequence is intensified sexual politics countered by a stronger resistance offered by fiction writers as reflecting in the lives of their female characters presented in their stories. Due to social restrictions that bound them within domestic spaces, these characters face worse violence by their male dominated families during the pandemic. Such physical and psychological pressures push these female characters to devise survival strategies (Munir et al. 2021).

This paper is divided into four major sections. The first part of the paper presents a review based on feminist debates in South Asia with a focus on Pakistan. The second part of the paper presents a brief review of selected literature written within the context of pandemics with a primary focus on Pakistan. The third part presents a textual analysis of selected stories by Pakistani writers set in the context of the pandemic. The final part of this paper outlines the resistance strategies adopted by these writers while also debating how they contribute towards strengthening the feminist movement in Pakistan.

I- Feminist Influences

Loomba and Lukose have discussed the complexity of feminist engagements in the South Asian context. They argue that history has continued to be disproportionately central to feminist scholarship in South Asia, in part because of the nature of postcolonial politics in the entire region (5). They define feminist theory in the light of the history of colonialism, nationalism, contemporary struggle of the marginalized (sexuality, religion, human rights, war, peace, globalization) and women's movements (1). They also acknowledge how the early feminist scholarship in South Asia emerged while "undoing the legacy of colonial epistemologies and knowledges and offering insights into nationalism and the postcolonial state; thus, interrogations of histories of the colonial past, decolonization, and the making of postcolonial nations were its major burdens" (4).

Contemporary feminist movement in Pakistan is defined diversely by various scholars. In the context of Pakistan, recent responses towards ‘Aurat March’ (Batool et al 2021) has been an important part of the discussion focused on feminist movement. I find Rubina Saigol’s approach to ‘Aurat March’ in the light of historical contexts of the previous movements useful for linking the pandemic focused literary responses of Pakistani writers discussed in the third section of this paper (Saigol 2). According to Saigol, the first phase involved the pre-partition practices such as ‘polygamy, purdah, child marriage, inheritance, divorce and the right to education’ (Saigol 3). The second phase was impacted by 1947 Partition and the traumatic memories of migration and violence. The third phase of ‘All Pakistan Women Association’ (APWA) in 1960s gave some agency to women in terms of legal rights for divorce, children and inheritance with social welfare and girl education being their primary agenda (3). By the 1970s, the women rights were also supported by the government (PPP 1971-1977) (4). The fourth phase involved ‘Women Action Forum’ (WAF) emerged in the 1980s in the urban centers focused on ‘democratic, inclusive, plural and seculars’ with a parallel “Sindhiani Tehrik” that operated against both patriarchy and feudalism in rural Sindh (4). Saigol has observed the political nature of these movements emerging in the 80s which diverged from the social uplift of the earlier movements (5). In her view, WAF also focused on bodies of women, issues related to sexuality while avoiding a radical resistance due to the religious and ideological associations of its members (6). Whereas the state focused on protecting and covering the female bodies through symbols like veil, domestic boundaries. Saigol debates that the new feminists have diverged in the dimension of ‘My Body, My Will’, reclaiming their bodies and fighting for public space (6). The fifth or new wave of feminist broke the silence over many women related issues and involved people from all factions of life, genders, identities, religions, classes (7). The stories discussed in this paper are discussed in the light of this fifth wave of feminist movement.

Beyond the local conceptualizations of feminism in Pakistan, Western responses to Islam is an important approach towards understanding feminist discourses emerging from or operating within Pakistan (Jamal 2005). One such observation is the working women’s movements as being secular and progressive reflecting growing antagonism between faith-based and secular feminist politics in Pakistan (Zia 2017).

The transnational impacts on feminism in Pakistan are discussed by Amina Jamal. She observes that Pakistani 'societies, politico-religious movements or so-called Islamist fundamentalist movements are becoming an important site for women's activism as well as the harnessing of such activism to promote agendas that seem to undermine women' (Jamal 52). Her discussion is also based on the division between the Islamist and secular women groups while regarding both as a form of women's struggles.

While the identification of feminism in Pakistan is generally understood through the lens of Islam (Jamal 2006) the aftermath of 9/11 can also be observed as impacting modern feminism in Pakistan as also approached through women's associations with right wing religious groups (Jamal 2005; 2009). Jamal resists the tendency towards a comparative analysis of women's resistance struggles across eastern and western worlds to dilute cultural differences and for opening space for translational feminist accounts based broadly on universal oppression of women (Jamal 60).

However, in the light of Saigol's analysis, it can be noted that the feminist movement in Pakistan is comparatively in the evolving stages. Hence, in my literary analysis, I observe feminist responses of Pakistani writers through this evolving focus on psychological suppression, female body – collectively enhancing the sexual politics within the domestic and public spheres of Pakistani women. It is significant to bear in mind that broadly a crisis like Covid-19 remains impacted by the lack of development, poor medical facilities depending on the policies implemented during various political regimes operating in Pakistan. These broader repercussions have no doubt impacted the handling of this crisis in Pakistan.

II – Research on Pandemic Literature

There have been diverse academic responses towards the global pandemics specifically from medical and socio-political perspectives. Recent studies include the influenza pandemic of 1918 (Viboud 2016; Osborne 2014; Davis 2011; Heaten and Falola, 2006) and Hongkong influenza (Viboud 2005). A useful resource for overviewing the study of pandemics is offered by Livio (2021). An interesting contribution is also Brüssow's report based on the linkages between Russian flu and Corona pandemic (2021).

In brief, after the outbreak of Covid, many such studies have been contributed across the globe (Raza 2021). However, due to the focus of

this paper, I would like to highlight two interesting contributions: Aimée Gasston's study of Katherine Mansfield's letters (2020) written in response to 1918 flu pandemic and Katherina Anne Porter's work (Davis 2011). Amongst Asian diasporic writers, a focus on literary flash fiction as an outcome of COVID is contributed by Jefferson Leih, Jireh Deng, Jemimah Wei, Chen Chen, Sadia Quraeshi Shepard. A close literary analysis and critique based on selected Indian literary works is useful in understanding the South Asian context-based responses to the pandemic (Priyanka 2021; Nathan 2021).

Due to the focus of this discussion on Pakistani literature, it is significant to mention the responses by Pakistani scholars such as, Muneesa Shamsie, essay, "Reading, Writing, Living in an Era of Pandemic" (2020). Shamsie has discussed her parental experiences during the pandemic. Combining her literary pursuits with household chores, she avoids the stress caused by multiple lockdowns. This is an autoethnographic, reflective piece shedding light on her experience of growing up in pre-partition Dhera Dhun and connects it with her present experience of parenting and maintaining a literary profile during the pandemic. She reviews her experiences of studying in a Victorian school in Sussex while witnessing the influenza flu, Spanish flu in pre-Partition India, and later Asian flu back in Karachi in the 1950s. Her mother plays a pivotal role in transforming her into an emancipated woman shedding the family tradition of wearing a veil (*purdah*). An important observation made by Shamsie is pandemic as the context in the literary works of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), the mention of anonymous infections in Ghalib's works, Jamil Khan Kochi's *99 Nights in Logar* (2019) and a succinct review of *The Stained-Glass Window* (2020). In the second half of her essay, she reflects on how COVID has restricted access to public events such as, literary festivals. Shamsie's well thought piece is useful in tracing the historical impact of pandemics on South Asians before and beyond Partition. However, the focus is more on personal experiences instead of broadly tracing the impact of the pandemic on Pakistani women through literary expressions.

Whereas, Ehsen and Alam have used Jean Baudrillard's concept of Simulacra and Simulation to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic creates hyperreality and an unreal sense of fear at the global level. The resources used for this study include newspapers, articles for research journals, digital data available online sources like BBC News, Foxnews, ABC news, Dawn, OXFAM, social media networks (Google, Facebook,

E-papers, Blogs, websites etc.) and mass media (T.V. Radio, magazines etc.). The authors debate that due to the pandemic, the paradoxical technological advancement and fear produced as an outcome of mass media has created “simulacrum of panic by generating hyper-realized literature on COVID-19” (Ehsan & Alam 2). The authors also observe how technological surveillance after the pandemic threatens the socioeconomic structures, public privacy and the behavioral patterns which have drained us. While the observations are made within the global context, the researchers limit their focus on developing countries such as Africa and Pakistan. They are critical about the kind of knowledge that these virtual platforms have created about the pandemic, and they generate negativity through the images of health concerns, joblessness, insecurity, economic downfall, political crisis. This discussion concludes on a contemplative note about the commodification of pandemic and the objectification of the public using hyperreal approaches to create false knowledge and fear amongst people while also generating a sense of fear. The paper presents an in-depth analysis of the long-term negative impacts of the developments in media that may be realized decades later. Nevertheless, the findings do not aim to highlight how social, class or gender-based communities may specifically be impacted by the pandemic.

From briefly overviewing the global scholarly responses towards pandemics this section has narrowed down the focus on South Asian and Pakistani responses. Overall, the critical gap identified in this exploration is the rare emphasis on the lives of Pakistani women.

III - Thematic Focus of Pandemic Fiction

I now offer a critical analysis based on the thematic focus of selected Pakistani writers contributing to *The Stained-Glass Window*. The themes discussed include the limitation of dependency on men, the impact of COVID beyond urban centers for example on rural women and transgender community, the dichotomies of virtual vs real, and the problematized marriages, relationships restricted by virtual interactions and closed domestic spaces. Kate Millet’s feminist perspectives are an important part for the theoretical engagement within this discussion.

Dependency on men

Faraz Talat’s novella, *74 Seventy Four* (2020) depicts the life of a 74-year-old scientist and her younger sibling- who is the protagonist of the story. The writer depicts a futuristic pandemic impacted world. This is the

story of a successful scientist, Dr Razia Nicoladze who has just turned 74. She is conducting research on a deadly virus which infects herself and jeopardizes her career leaving her no time to survive. Dr. Nicolzade represents a “patriarchal woman” (Tyson 86) who faces professional jealousy from not only her male colleagues but especially from her separated husband who works at the same laboratory. Despite the dystopian (Booker 1994) aura of this novella, her character is a classic example of a Pakistani woman who is constantly undermined by the patriarchal quarters that challenge her self-confidence and assertiveness. Patriarchal set up points out the absence of these qualities as a proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, “self-effacing and submissive” (Tyson 87). Razia’s character may be rare due to her professional choice of becoming a scientist, however, she develops psychological resilience and despite being infected by a virus constantly fights against the male dominated system.

Interestingly, Talat’s novella exemplifies male writers’ perspective on feminist issues in Pakistan and is used as an example of Pakistani pandemic literature to emphasize that the same theme of women struggling domestically and professionally during the pandemic echoes through various short stories in *The Stained-Glass Window* (2020). The collection depicts educated and independent women depending on their male counterparts during the pandemic; they constantly struggle to break through such ties. A significant focus is on middle-class, educated Pakistani women who continue to negotiate their agency, social space and reconstruct their subjectivities while struggling to keep their relationships intact while creating innovative resistance strategies (Yasmin 2020).

Some examples following this thematic focus include the stories by Naveed Shahzad, Rumana Hussain and Attiya Dawood. Attiya Dawood’s protagonist, Minha in “Unlearning the Ropes” (Munir & Kehar 45) is an educated academic juggling between the family and professional commitments like Talat’s protagonist Dr. Nicolzade. Dealing with the family during the lockdown and frustrated by her mother-in-law's efforts towards assigning her a ‘sex role’ by offering ‘domestic service’, restricting her to a ‘biological experience’ undermining her status as a professional (Millet 26). To break through all these pressures, she fakes being infected by the virus.

Naveed Shahzad’s “The Fourth Day” (45) depicts the life of an anonymous woman who mysteriously passes away in her house on the

fourth day of the lockdown. Being a collector, she is preserving the memories of a man in her life. His elegant clothes neatly organized in her drawers reflect a mysterious reality about her past. While her landlord, co-workers and acquaintances swore that ‘she had never mentioned a lover, child or husband’ (Munir and Kehar 9). The story stereotypically creates gender categories through material possessions (Millet: 26). The physical exclusion of a man in her life is the strength of Shahzad’s dual perspective: Pakistani women may seem to be going against the expected social norms by surviving independently, but the paradoxical presence of men remains an important part of their lives.

Pursing the theme of dependence on men, Rumana Hussain’s “What time to be Alive” (Munir & Kehar 23) depicts the story of a sister who is dealing with her twin brother suffering from the Covid. Losing her parents in a plane crash makes her emotionally dependent on her only brother while she also relying on being treated by a male psychiatrist to achieve a balance in her life.

The impact of COVID beyond urban centers

Most of these stories are focused on how educated women have been impacted in the urban centers of Pakistan. Iffat Saeed’s “Fertility and Fecundity” (34) is a rare example of a rural setting; this is the story of Dilawar who ties a knot in an arranged marriage with a village girl who shatters the patriarchal expectations of conceiving a child. The course of events diverted his life towards working in a feudal house as a driver and being attracted to the seductive Kohled eyes of his employer’s youngest daughter, Laila who is impregnated by him on the night of her two elder sisters’ wedding. Because his wife gives birth to a dead child, he replaces the alive baby with the dead one ending the only evidence of his secret affair.

Set in the rural context of Sahiwal, according to Saeed, “one of the most fertile regions of our country” (34), the story is about the social expectations of a woman being fertile. Saeed uses an intertextual reference of a Sufi legend associated with the fertility of this region symbolized through a “boulder” that turned into a spot of “secret rendezvous” for the young lovers (34). This is also the spot where Dilawar’s beloved hands him over the alive baby.

The story revolves around the theme of romantic love as an ‘emotional manipulation that a male is free to exploit, since love is the only

circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity' (Millet 37). When Dilawar starts working for the local feudal, he is intrigued by the masks covering his master and his family's face. More than the preventive measures against the COVID, the mask also symbolizes tradition of veils as a sign of distancing them from the low cast 'outsiders' slaving away in their domestic spaces.

This story politically highlights male superiority based on the 'primitive condition' and 'primary principle' of 'fertility or vitalist processes' like 'the creative force in the visible birth of children' (Millet 28). The story reflects on the double marginality of the wife; she is deprived of procreation by being forced to attribute 'the power of life to phallus alone' (28) while also suppressed due to her low class status. While the male protagonist, despite his indiscretions, and low social stratus sociologically maintains a strong ideological role (Millet 35) of 'begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is a property' (Millet 33). Family, in this story represents a 'unit in the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads' or men (Millet 33); the male protagonist maintains his ownership over both, his beloved and his wife while 'insisting upon legitimacy' of the child (Millet: 35). Ironically, both the female characters 'ultimately dependent upon the male' protagonist of this story for emotional support and fertility (Millet 35). Identified through the notion of class in patriarchy, he successfully sets 'one woman against the other'; maintaining 'double standards'. Concurrently, he strategically participates in the lives/ worlds of both the women to 'play the estranged women against each other as rivals' (Millet 38).

The impact of COVID on transgenders

Claire Pamment has explored the historical struggles and the tradition of reclaiming heritage by Khawaja Sira or transgender community in her documentary '*Vadhai*' (2021) and a short performance entitled, '*Tesri Dhun*' or 'Third Tune' (Pamment 2015). Pamment's work has boldly voiced the narratives of exclusion, pain and vulnerability while celebrating heteronormality and the contribution of transgenders in the celebrations and lives of public. In another discussion, a transgender activist Anaya Sheikh and Pamment have highlighted the stigma, marginality, misrepresentation of transgender community by raising important questions about their mistreatment in the social context of Pakistan (Prentki & Breed 2021).

Focused on generally overlooked plight of transgenders in Pakistan, following Pamment's focus, Ilona Yousaf's story "Pandemic" (Munir & Kehar 140) portrays the same marginality of transgenders. Driving through the city in a 'lock down' mode, a couple observes the petty routines of the people on the roads. Amongst these characters is the 'tired mass of a masked figure in a dotted Shalwar Kameez. Head bowed, elbows resting on knees spread wide, hands hanging loose between them' (Munir & Kehar:140-141) of a *hijra* (transgender). They recall this character as a lively performer in the past but now sadly observe that "This same hijra, bowed, despondent on the step" (141), perhaps bearing the social and economic pressures during the lockdown.

In the context of the adverse impacts of pandemic on transgender community, Yousaf's creative response and Pamment's academic debate focused on the marginality is carried forward by Nida Kirmani in her recent interview with a *khwaja sira* (transgender) as a representative case study from the community impacted during the pandemic in Lahore (Kirmani 169). Khursand Byar Ali, a transgender activist and performer (Nautanki Productions) working as a project manager for Commission of Jurists and Saathi Foundation. The interview indicates that due to strict lockdowns, the community "cannot go out publicly as a group to get money through *vadhai* or *toli*" or as sex workers" (Kirmani 170). To financially support their families, the crisis has made some of them involved in sex work even if they did not practice it in the past, jeopardizing their health and lives during Covid-19 (172). *Toli* is a performance group that visits weddings for performing and *vadhai* is related to communities (170). The other transgenders working as "tailors or seamstresses, beauticians, or as solo dancers" also share the same concerns (171). They still must make both ends meet by paying rents and earning bread. They are partially supported by NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and CBOs (community-based organizations) which provide rations and partial support (171). Nevertheless, this does not guarantee the support for those residing in the peripheral areas. The multiple lockdowns have created an impression that "there is depression and fear associated with staying at home" (172). The situation has a deeper impact on this community which is not salaried or can get loans to pay off the increasing rents and living costs and mainly depends on daily wages and labour (172). Despite the government initiating the "Ehsas Program", the involvement of transgender community is partially impacted (10% approximately) as they require smart phones and

technological knowledge to be able to use such a support system (173); the transgender community expects a simplified support system (174).

These discussions reflect on the hostility against transgender community, their struggle for job quotas and the experience of marginality is an ongoing experience which is worsened in the context of Covid. This is also evident in a recent protest in response to the attacks by ‘*beela* culture’ (*beelas* refer to men who regularly and systematically attack transgenders) on 19th September 2021.

The Inevitable Dichotomy: The Virtual vs the Real

The virtual space in this collection consumes the lives of the female protagonists who loose personal space and life. “Poetry shall Wait:” (42) by Nighat Dad (a digital rights activist and lawyer) and “Intruders” (64) by Taha Kehar strongly depict this theme. The first story critiques how lockdowns have restricted the creative inputs of the poets. Hence, Dad’s protagonist’s efforts to attend virtual meetings and professional commitments has prevented her from writing.

Whereas Kehar’s story, ‘Intruders’ applies the techniques of humor (Childs & Fowler 111) and absurdity (Camus 2018) to depict an episode of a virtual *nikah* (matrimonial contract according to Muslim tradition) with a man who resides abroad. Since the pandemic has restricted the social interactions, the female protagonist’s (Zoya) family has decided to conduct the ceremony via zoom. Ironically, socially privileged class are over dressed for a virtual *nikah* stuck in chaos of the virtual wedding creates a sense of comic absurdity in the story. The story ends with Zoya’s virtual *nikah* joined by an intruder who seems to have consented on behalf of the groom – a dilemma that remains mysteriously unaddressed at the end of the story. The story reflects the paradox faced by a woman who seems to be divided between accomplishing the formality of the wedding and the illusion of materializing this formality (Childs & Fowler 1). It also reflects the notion of hyperreality discussed earlier with reference to Ehsan and Alam’s work in section I of this paper.

The same sense of virtual vs real dichotomy also reflects in teenage author Mahnaz Munir’s story, “Being Positive” (102), which is focused on a young girl being quarantined. As a vlogger, due to the fear of losing her intellectual abilities she constantly shares her experiences with her followers who become a means of venting for her. Lacking the interaction with her real family during quarantine apparently for the benefit of her

mother and sibling, she finds herself relying on her virtual followers for emotional support. The writer intentionally removes the presence of a man closely related to the protagonist from this story as a means of empowering her as an independent thinker while challenging the conventional patriarchal structure of the society (Millet 33).

Problematic institution of marriage

These stories indicate that the social and cultural pressures depicted through the lives of these protagonists struggling to maintain a peaceful marriage despite the negative roles of their abusive husband and/or in-laws is a repetitive theme in this collection. In these stories, women experience a halted life during the pandemic when the dominating presence of their husbands at home who through ‘continual surveillance’ (Millet 54) take control of their bodies and minds (Millet 54). Consequently, they take important decisions about the future of their marriages and the dominating presence of patriarchal authorities in their lives (Millet 54) while they have a chance to reflect on taking major decisions about their lives (divorces and breakups). For most of the female protagonists in these stories, it is a matter of emancipation from being treated as a “sexual object than a person” (Millet 54). For example, “The Last Letter” (117) by Farah Zia is based on the final letter that a wife writes to her alcoholic husband before she breaks through the institution of marriage by divorcing him.

Whereas the “Gulmohar House” (Munir & Kehar 121) by Huma Sheikh is the story of a woman pleased to document her life in a story named after her parent’s house (the title of the story). The protagonist - a writer - named Rubab (also the narrator of the story) experiences an abusive relationship. She is marginalized and minoritized by her husband and is exhausted serving the purpose of entertaining him as her ruler (Millet 57). Finding her daughters professionally settled; she decides to go ahead with the decision of divorce. This theme of a problematic marriage is taken up further by Kulsoom Bano in “A Dead Daughter”. Tahira. (mother) has adopted the ‘traditional gender role’ that has made her weak and submissive (Tyson 2006: 85). After her only daughter commits suicide to escape the reality of her own failing marriage.

While most of the stories in the collection depict female characters destined to face the tragedy of a forced or unhappy marriage, “The

Unwritten Story” (133) by Wajiha Haider presents an exceptional case of a male protagonist who dwells over his failed marriage and his wife (Mimi) walking out on him. Facing several health issues, he also spends time contemplating writing a story about his unhappy marriage, but death takes over his ambition. In many ways, he does not fulfil the social expectations of a strong man because he dies with a sense of regret based on his failed marriage combined with his inability to document his personal story. Unlike the other stories focused on the regrets of women, his story goes against the “traditional gender roles dictate that men are supposed to be strong (physically powerful and emotionally stoic) ... unmanly for men to show fear or pain” (Tyson 86).

IV - Conclusion: What are the Resistance Strategies?

The above discussion based on selected stories from *The Stained-Glass Window* exemplify a few resistance strategies adopted by Pakistani writers concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the lives of Pakistani women. In this discussion, I identify resistance at two levels: firstly, through the adoption of certain stylistic techniques that the writers adopt. Secondly, through a conscious focus on the feminist concerns which I argue contribute towards strengthening the feminist movement in Pakistan. These strategies are discussed below.

Resistance strategies adopted by these writers vary from their conscious focus on the lives of Pakistani women to experimentation with the writing style. An interesting example is “Gulmohar House” by Huma Sheikh (Munir & Kehar 121). “The Unwritten Story” by Wajiha Haider (133) unusually focuses on a male protagonist reflecting over his failed marriage just before dying due to terminal illness. Thus, storytelling is adopted both as a means of resisting the social pressures on women in Pakistan and as a means of empowering their female protagonists. Using the style of virtual communication via WhatsApp messages, zoom meeting, blog writing, emails, dialogues, and letters is an interesting technique adopted by several writers as an experimentation with story writing techniques.

The use of irony, humor, absurdity have been discussed earlier. Here, I want to highlight an important strategy of introducing poetic verse in this fiction collection. For example, *The Stained-Glass Window* commences with Mehvash Amin’s poem “To Covid-19: The Deaths I do and Don’t Want” (Munir & Kehar 1-3). Amin’s free verse reflects on the “Cannibalising ferocity/ Of the virus’ (1) and the consequent deaths.

Growing up in Pakistan, in the past she had been warned “Of men inserting phallic guns into windows to snatch purses” (Munir & Kehar 2). The sense of insecurity that she felt in male dominated society has multiplied due to the virus and men haunting the lives of women.

Poetic expression also plays an important role in the life of Rumana Hussain’s protagonist in, ‘What a Time to be Alive’ (Munir & Kehar: 23). Amna relies on reading poetry for solace and as a means of recovering both from the trauma of losing her parents and dealing with a Covid infected twin brother. Pakistani poetic expression reminds her of how Covid has transformed the lives of women:

Whispers nothings when I tread
Its roads in the dark
It calls me to bare
Its inflictions like one would
Bare a wounded heart
Doors closed
Streets in silence
Weary Walls
Padlocked openings
Dead bodies inside rentals
Been lodging for years (Munir and Kehar: 28).

As indicated above, the writers use free verse in this collection as a means of weaving the thematic focus of women’s lives impacted by the lockdowns through the symbols of closed doors, silent streets, padlocked openings, darkness, and silence in this poem. For instance, “Dead bodies inside rentals” takes us back to the mysterious old lady who passed away quietly on the fourth day of the lockdown in Naveed Shazad’s story, “The Fourth Day” (Munir & Kehar 5).

To conclude, Rubina Saigol’s has rightly focused on feminist movements in Pakistan by suggesting that:

The collective non-hierarchical manner of working and the refusal to take any funding is similar to the functioning practiced by WAF and represents continuity with the past. But the entire framing of the narrative around the body, sexuality, personal choices and rights is new. The young groups of women say

openly what their grandmothers could not dare to think and their mothers could not dare to speak (7).

Most of the stories discussed in this paper reflect on the issues that have generally never been discussed in the context of Pakistan and also contemplate the maturing feminist movement (discussed in Part II of the paper) based on the reflections of these writers. Saigol has critiqued the way feminist movements have been preoccupied with women's legal rights, state authority, citizenship, identity creating silence over other important issues like sexuality, LBGT and transgender issues (Saigol 41). In this respect these stories have progressively utilized the time spent in lockdowns to bridge the concerns of the feminist movements by focusing on escalating plight and deepening sexual politics in the COVID-19 context. I have neither explored their dilemmas as a 'western import' (Loomba and Luckas 4) nor studied purely through Islamic feminist approaches. In fact, they are explored as an outcome of the pandemic crisis that has highlighted a new dimension of sexual politics within the context of Pakistan. Thus, resistance in these works can be linked to the fifth wave of feminism maturing in Pakistan.

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