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RESEARCH PAPER

Portrayal of Gender in Contemporary Fiction by Female Novel Writers

[1]Muhammad Hassan Abbasi*   [2]Hafiza Mariam Asif [3]Muhammad Farshad

1. Lecturer English , Department of Basic Sciences & Humanities, Dawood University of Engineering and Technology Karachi , Sindh, Pakistan
2. Lecturer English, Department of Social Sciences Muhammad Ali Jinnah University (MAJU), Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Basic Sciences & Humanities-English, Dawood University Engineering and Technology Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan

| ***Corresponding Author:** | hassan.abbasi@duet.edu.pk |

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on exploring and understanding allocation of gender roles by Contemporary Pakistani female writers in their novels. Pakistan is a patriarchal society with men having superior position in the society and women are jus subordinates. This ideology is reflected in fiction writing as well while narrating about male and female characters. Therefore, this study analysis Tehmina Durrani's 'Blasphemy' and Qaisra Shahraz's 'The Holy woman' to compare to study about gender roles as depicted in the novel. The basic aim is to figure out the ideology behind gender construction through language and discourse. Hence, a qualitative comparative case study has been undertaken which examines gender portrayal in each novel. Using purposive sampling, data has been collected from two novels with similar themes and content analysis has been used as a primary tool to obtain data by tracing every minute detail about male and female characters in the novel to give a generalized theory. This research identifies that male and female characters portrayed in the novels have their groundings in certain theoretical framework which is drafted by writers through language in Fiction. A further research can be conducted on analyzing and comparing male and female novel writers.

| **KEYWORDS** | Contemporary, Comparative, Gender, Female Writers And Novel |

Introduction

Gender portrayal is one of the basic theme that is reflected though the novels. It is reflected in the major genres of the novel like romance, tragedy and satire. Such instances are created through language that gives individual traits of gender representation in each genre. Language is the tool that gives different voices to these portrayals through the use of imagery, discourse and style. The representation of gender finds its place in the classic literature as well where this theme is adopted mostly by Jane Austen in her novels, her novels seems to revolve around the notion of gender and through the use of language, she allocates different positions to each gender. Austen's constructions of gender roles and their development reflects the society that dominated the English public throughout the romantic period and preface the models of masculinity that dominated the Victorian era as observed by Ailwood (2008). Austen achieves this aim by using imagery of houses, gardens and landscapes to provide the reader insights into her male and female characters. Hence symbolic representation of gender roles became one significant aspect adopted by coming generations' writers, mostly by post-colonial writers. The impact of colonization left its marks upon writers, hence their portrayal reflected an ideology about gender representation. As Ahmed (2012), focuses his attention towards socio-political representation of women in Ali's Twilight in Delhi (1940), where he traces out the portrayals of women of Delhi, who lived under the influence of their male characters and under the hold of custom and tradition. Hence British colonialism had affected them negatively and their social identity was only as preservers of local Mughal culture. Ahmed

(2009), focuses on Sidhwa's 'Ice-Candy Man' (1988), has portrayed the impact of partition on the lives and bodies of women as they were colonized twice, first by British and then by men in the Indo-Pak sub-continent. The same theme is pre-modified in Sidhwa's 'The Bride' (2006), where a girl *Munni* found in a train by *Qasim* is married to his relative without her consent in favor of clan's decision. After the marriage she was beaten harshly by her husband, she decided to escape and was rescued by the Army. Hence women were portrayed as oppressed and weak souls, while male in control of their female characters.

However years after partition, Qamar *et.al* (2014), observes that such roles were pre-modified and became somewhat clear in the writing of contemporary male writers, as in Mohsin Hamid's *The Moth Smoke (2000),* where *Mumtaz,* an urban women suffers from the neglect of her husband but learns to survive. Also in Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, the female protagonist in an urban setting fights against Pakistan's misogynous patriarchy and religious majority. Hence through magical realism he sets out to show different aspects of male and female characters that exist in the society, especially the struggle of a Christian girl. However the gender roles assigned to characters remain fixed, where female characters are shown as the oppressed ones and male reflected as the patriarchal society. These seems to be the major themes throughout. Chambers (2015) claims that various contemporary writers have used their works of fiction to criticize and protest against the patriarchal society. From 90's to 2015 the same themes seems to be embarked in the writings of male and female authors. This research focuses on two female authors, Tehmina Durrani and Qaisra Shahraz, who have written their novels over a period of three years but the same theme of gender portrayal appears to emerge from their writings. The trend haven't changed, even the recent ones, '*A Season for martyrs' (2015)*, by Bina Shah and *'The Upstairs wife' (2015)*, by Rafia Zakaria seems to show the same features of gender portrayal, though researches have focused more on the representation of female characters i.e. women only. Thus this research tends to make an attempt to focus on the writings of female novelists by comparing the gender roles of male and female characters that are incorporated in *'Blasphemy' (1998)*, and *'The Holy Woman' (2001).* This will indeed generate a new theory to the gender construction roles assigned by the female writers and to trace out the possible theories that are working behind such portrayals.

Literature Review

Bovarnick (2007) defines comparatives a syntactic construction that serves to express comparison between two or more elements. It is often used in studies to contrast the elements of one text with the other, to figure out the differences and similarities that exist between two entities. It is a useful method of generating comparative data within a research.

Gender is an identity marker, characterized by social, psychological and physical constraints. Nikolayevna (2013), claims that language serves as the tool for this identity. There are various theoretical approaches to this simple notion of gender which reflect individual traits about gender. Biological theorists divide gender according to physical outlook which differs in each gender, while there are social theories as well which reflect that gender is a product of society which ethnographers would claim can be divided into roles assigned to each gender in a particular community. However there are psychological theories as well which predetermine the roles assigned to each gender. Hence language provides the core feature to this term 'gender' by affirming through researches the particular style adopted by each gender. Therefore the portrayal of a male character is that of a brave, courageous, bold, reserve, confident and a rational being, whereas a female character, weak, expressive, shy, submissive, emotional, and an irrational being. These themes tend to divide human characteristics into two categories.

Novel is a long narrative normally prose which depicts fictional characters, plot and settings in a particular manner. Ian Watt (2000) says in 'The rise of novel' that eighteenth

century was the age in which the novel was established as the most outstanding and enduring form of literature. It is to the credit of the major eighteenth-century novelists that they freed the novel from the influence and elements of high flown romance and fantasy, and used it to interpret the everyday social and psychological problems of the common man. Thus they introduced realism, democratic spirit, and psychological interest into the novel— the qualities which have since then been recognized as the essential prerequisites of every good novel and which distinguishes it from the romance and other stories. Novel developed in each era and different themes among it emerged like the novel of sentiment, gothic novel, novel of doctrine and the novel of manners. Modern novels seems to be constructed on these parameters of novel. However themes seem to emerge within a novel at different periods of time that adds more artistry. Sub-continent writers also tried this art and portrayed through novels their culture, social beliefs and political lifestyle.

Literature sometimes deviates from linguistic forms; some researchers claim that the use of images to portray gender is an art. However that is not the case, there are certain images that have been associated with each gender and they build the context only through language. The research conducted by Kaesarewani (2014) on Blasphemy (1998) triggers the element of power and religion and associates it with the weakness of women. It explores and question the true meaning of the religion 'Islam' regarding the role of women, Durrani's portrayal is just a mere voice to these kinds of oppressed women. The author has contextualized his data by using psychoanalytic approach by relating Tehmina's experience with the novel's male and female character. It has emphasized that the use of strong vocabulary and images is merely because of the influence of society that the writer has depicted in her writings. The aims seem to give a clear picture of the lives of women in rural setting. Power and religion are the two affective weapons with which male can oppress female. While Haleem (2014) & Zia (2009), both incorporates the same viewpoint, by capitalizing on feminist and gender theories for analyzing gender roles in "The Holy woman"(2001), they also claim that such roles can be challenged as well. Study claims that women have been defined as the other gender and this concept finds its traces from classic French feminist text i.e. 'The Second Sex'. The text analysis of novel points out that male and female characters take their traditional roles of gender-biases, like that of *Zarri Baano*, *Siraj Din* and *Habib Khan*. Also evident is the transition in gender roles which can be observed easily during the course of events. Like *Zarri* and *Shahzada* shows obedience and submissiveness at an early phase but later on they emerge as confident, authoritative, independent and dominant individuals.Similarly male characters can be seen with this tendency, like *Xawar, Musa* and *Sikendar* openly express their feelings of love. The novel also reveals the fact that change is taking place in society as a result of globalization, education and awareness.

Political and social changes have always influenced writers; they seem to criticize such practices that exist in the society by giving them a voice in their novels. Fatima (2012) & Ali (2015), base their judgments by introducing us to the social and political realities; they base their results by identifying it with Islamization principle introduced by Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) and its impact on women in the decade following Zia's death (1988-99). Both the writers explore the construction of women veil through their characters *Hiir and Zarri Baano,* and the ambiguity it generates. As Zadoon (2015), claims it reveals complex categories, the various meanings that are associated with the veil in context to modernity, patriarchal power, tradition and rural principles which reflect the ideology of Zia's laws. However it also revolts against such notions and shift towards western ideals of choice, gender equality and free access to public. But weakness of female characters is more obvious while male are associated with power as they control religious, social and political affairs in the writings of contemporary writers till date.

Society alone plays a key role in representing the scenario of practices adopted by its people. Mubarik (2015), incorporates various sub-themes to generate data for gender portrayal like physical and sexual abuse, gender disparity, and deterioration of moral and

social values and misrepresentation of Islamic values. She incorporates postmodern theory to analyze the character of *Hiir* and basis his result that the novel is actually a product of facts incorporated as Fiction since such themes exist in the society, referring to daily stories in newspapers which gives a strong basis that male still exercise their power over women.

Images play a key role in figuring out the role assigned to each gender, Khatwani (2014) &Zaib*et.al* (2015), sets out to explore this key feature in Blasphemy (1998). They found that male (public versus private, religious versus social) and female (weaker versus rebellious soul) tend to have two identities, which are observed under the parameters of images they are assigned with in a context, like '*Piir Sae~* the religious saint and '*Hiir*' a housewife restrained under the parameters of religion. They claim that clearly the society drafts these images and they are reproduced in the form of novel by writers to give the real picture. Clearly these studies set the background for observing gender roles in any novel since it intakes physical appearance and societal barriers as key aspects adopted by writers for portraying female characters as distinguished from male ones. These images sets the background for various themes, death of emotions, Islamic values & self-identities that incorporates in figuring out the various aspects of male and female characters.

However this study incorporates various elements together to locate different instance of gender roles and give a comparative analysis of contemporary female writers like Durrani's '*Blasphemy'* and Qaisra's '*The Holy Woman'*. Moreover to trace out to what degree the difference lies, previous studies focus on one aspect either images that develop male and female characters or representation of female characters by comparing male characters and power themes they are associated with. This study indeed tries to figure out male and female gender with a different lens, how each gender is introduced, referred and the analysis of the discourse that takes place between the characters. It attempts to provide a comprehensive research in which all the elements are incorporated through language. Language shapes perceptions, believes and social practices and these tend to reflect in the style of the writer. This study tries to give a holistic picture of the gender representation. Also assimilating two novels together further strengthens this study in identifying the different methods of constructing gender roles by separate female authors.

Material and Methods

The writers have focused on the gender portrayal in sub-urban society, it is an interesting study to find out how female writers contribute towards gender roles and also minimizing the effect of gender biasedness. Hence qualitative case study through content analysis has been carried out to obtain data from the two novels. Case studies are reliable to obtain data effectively while content analysis helps in obtaining data from relevant sections of the novel.

The present study gathers data from two novels, *Blasphemy (1998)* by Tehmina Durrani and *The Holy Woman (2001)* by Qaisra Shahraz who have used similar themes in their novels such as life in rural areas, specific roles assigned to each gender according to the cultural traditions have been the sole theme. Hence purposive sampling has been used to obtain data rapidly by comparing these two novels. The reason for focusing on Pakistani fiction instead of any other piece of fiction is simply to develop awareness among people that how our own writers construct gender identities. Since we are socially aware of the status each gender occupies in our society, such instances are easy to identify in the writing of these female writers. The main tool of data collection was observation, because various quotations are taken from the novels which reveal the nature of portrayal and position of the men and women characters in the novel.

Results and Discussion

While critically analyzing the two texts and its context different categories seems to emerge in which the writers have tried to assign gender roles. During data collection the focus was on the main lead characters of the novels, alongside reference to the minor characters is also given, because they cannot be entirely left out of the study.

Overview of the Role of Gender

Blasphemy (1998), launches a new era of writing in South Asian literature by exposing the evils enshrined in the patriarchal social circle which narrows the meaning of religion using it as a tool to exploit and subjugate women folk.(Khatwani, 2008). Blasphemy revolves around two main characters *Hiir,* an ordinary girl and *Piir Sae~,* a Sufi saint*.* The economic conditions pushed *Hiir* to marry this saint, marriage seems to be a silent submission for women *"always remain subservient to your husband's will"* (Durrani, 1998, p.125) .The social constraints and honor made *Heer* to bear the pain. Her identity is transformed from an ordinary girl to a *malkani* to *piyari*, the prostitute. Sufferings and exploitations have not only degraded *Hiir* but also have dehumanized her. Ironically only after the death of *Piir*, Hiir manages to step out of *Haveli* and she decides to strip off the mask from the face of *Piir Sae~*. These lines reflect her views about"*Piir Sae~ imposter, molester, murderer and child abuser is worshipped. He was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was the rapist of orphans".* (Durrani, 1998, p.170). In short, dying self-identities are portrayed and a female bears no individual personality throughout the novel. The novel depicts two identities of "*Piir Sae~, private versus public"* and it reveal how this pious man *Piir Sae~* throws women of his circle to the act of evils and present himself as the custodian of Islamic religion, he rapes the orphan girl's "*kaali, Yatmadi"* and the girls of widow, and he forces his wife to the act of prostitution. Yet he was the pure saint in public. Son's approval of *Piir Sae~'s* actions give another aspect of power inheritance from father to son which is common among men.

Qaisra Shahraz 'The Holy Woman' (2001), further enhances the roles assigned to male and female. The novel presents different roles *Zanni Baano*, her mother, her father *Habib*, her grandfather *Siraj Din, Sikendar* and *Ibrahim Musa* as the main leads. The protagonist *Zanni Baano* tells us how she was trapped in the hands of patriarchal oppression and how she emerges as an independent woman at the end. She had no chance, crushed against the wall of patriarchal tyranny, even with her youth, feminism and university education she becomes a victim of feudal traditions as she is forced to become the heir, the holy women after the death of his brother on his father's commands. Like her mother, it had been drilled into her from infancy to both, respect and pay homage to her father's wishes and those of the male elders. Her views are crystal clear when she says *"I am not only your daughter. I am me! But you and father have brutally stripped me of my identity as a normal woman and instead reduced me to a role of puppet. You have all jailed and number me into a commitment which I will have to go along with-but not willingly".*(Shahraz, 2001, p. 130). In the role of a holy woman she is sent to the Al Azhar University to get religious education and finally she becomes an independent woman visiting various Muslim countries for educational purposes. At the end she is granted permission to marry *Sikendar* but only after her father's death ironically.

The novels depicts traditional gender biased roles, *Habib Khan*, a landlord who proves to be a traditional man and after the death of his son, decided to sacrifice his daughter in the name of religion deciding a dark future for her, to become a Holy woman of his clan and inherit all the property, remaining unmarried throughout her life. He knows that she loves *Sikendar* but still in the name of traditions he marries her off to the Holy Quran as his patriarchal thinking is reflected, when he claims to be the head of the female and asks his wife to obey his order and she did as a mark of honesty and loyalty. *Siraj Din* depicts the same ideology as all matters are finally decided with his permission.

However the writer has challenged the gender stereotyped roles by depicting a unique gender role in the case of *Sikendar* as he portrays an unconventional role. He gets angry at the decision of making *Zarri* a Holy woman and requests her not to be one because that will challenge her individual freedom. His liberal thinking is reflected when he is going to marry *Zarri Baano* who has become a Holy women. *"All I can assure you now is that everything will be in your hands, I will make no demands on you".* (Shahraz, 2001, p.387).*I will be a friend and companion to her"* (Shahraz, 2001, p.388). Another unconventional character is that of Xaawar, a feudal lord who wishes and marries a girl of lower class, *Firdous*. Yet another character is of *Ibrahim Musa*, like *Sikendar*, he loves *Zarri Baano* but she refuses him as his father and grandfather have deprived her of marriage. These characters confirm that gender roles are social constructs and can be changed.

Sexism through Names

Language reflects the attitude of the speaker. Hence in fiction the characters are very often introduced by their names. The names seem to give a holistic picture of the characters in fiction. Certain element of power and inferiority is attached with the naming of particular character by these female writers. Like in Blasphemy, Tehmina mostly draws a broad distinction between her female and male characters, her male characters' names mainly denote the ingredient of power, physical health and authority.

Piir Sae~ (holy master), Chotte Sae~ (young master)

Raja ji (Prince), Maharaja (King)

Pathaan (tribesmen from North West), baloch (a man from the province of balochistan), fauji (soldier)

While the names assigned to the female characters refers to sexism where individual traits have taken the form of names. Like qualities have become names of the characters instead of a proper name.

Chiil (eagle), jamadaarni (female sweeper), Kaali (dark skinned girl), Toti (talks a lot), Piyaari (pretty one), Miisani (cunning girl), munni (small girl), SaXi bibi (generous lady), Sukki (skiny person), badrung (ugly)

Apparently male characters have an influence over the names of female characters. Also their names have been derived from the male characters, like *Amma Sae~* (madam mother).Whereas *sae~* is basically used with male characters.

There appears to be a crystal clear distinction between the names of the each gender which projects the mindset of the culture they are part of. It indeed reveals a lot about the role and difference in position assigned to each character. However the distinction seems to occupy its place in Qaisra's novel as well where adjectives are attached with the names of women, while male still enjoys the power and authority*. Such as Baba Siraj Din (elder of the family), WaDeraa Xawar (landlord), farmer faisal,* while *females as, Lahori women, Shahzaadi Ibaadat, chaudhrani kaniiz, second chaudhrani, washerwomen's daughter and izzat (honor).*

Gender Construction and Ideology

Language is used as a powerful tool to describe the qualities of an individual in fiction. Hence it is an essential tool for Pakistani writers to depict the strength the characters bear through imagery and phrases. Male figures are shown with powerful imagery, like "*Piir Regal: a king, holy man"* (Durrani, 1998, p.16*), "hand came down like an axe, lion roar"* (Durrani, 1998, p. 43), "*tall man in his thirties, towering figures, handsome"* (Shahraz, 2001, p.8*),* and bears the strength that is socially associated with men in rural areas like "*I will*

*bring your neck like a chicken" (*Durrani, 1998, p.145), '*cook you cut you with a knife into little pieces'*(Durrani, 1998, p. 201*),* as protectors of Islam and family '*like to protect your honor, you are entitled to exercise authority'* (Durrani, 1998, p.45), *Xaliifa* (Durrani, 1998, p. *62), 'homeless men were kicked out of the shrine'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 59*), 'I am very much product of my clan'* (Shahraz, 2001, p.8) *and* as in full control of their alleys and female characters I '*know how to make woman talk, pushed her away'.* (Durrani, 1998, p. 210). Their words are paralleled to commands which were to be obeyed by the rest… *'my daughter will become a holy women and marry Holy Quran…it can and will happen…blackmailed her* (Shahraz,2001), *and* as figures of high moral characters, like *it is too degrading for a wealthy well born landlord to go chasing after a woman* (Shahraz,2001).

Women are shown as inferior to men. Their real strength and identity appears to be dependent upon male characters. Like '*as she obligatory bowed her head in front of him'…..she was a tall women but he still was a few inches taller, since when did our women start falling in love before marriage….You will receive three thalaks* (Shahraz,2001) *, No men in the area will be safe with the black bitch on the prowl'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 54), '*She would always be a buddle to him'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 78), *a mad piirni stared back at me* (Durrani, 1998, p. *205), I pray she dies before she can sting us and women as sisters, daughters, wives and mothers transformed into bubbles and burst* (Durrani, 1998, p. 222).

Female characters are portrayed as appealing to men and seductive. *'All women know nothing except sex can hold a man and yet most fail in keeping him'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 55), '*Don't talk of her beauty for what is it when it is hidden away for no living man to admire, to love and to reproduce it'* (Shahraz, 2001, p. 180), *'I wait like a thirsty crop waiting for ran and a pregnant cloud circles above my head and leaves without raining'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 90), *'I was either boiling like hot milk or chilling like ice'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 224), '*drawn by magnet'.. Placed her hands on him* (Shahraz, 2001).

Their physical features have been shown as images of the character they bear and future actions like *Blew the dupaaTa off her head…..assessed Zarri from head to foot….bet to draw you into his net, her check dimpling playfully, smarting cheeks twisting her beautiful mouth* (Shahraz, 2001). *Women as dark, almond shaped eyes, wistful eyes* (Shahraz, 2001). *) in contrast men having brown eyes, brown eye brows and iron timbre of his voice* (Shahraz, 2001).

Female characters are shown as weak like '*so you are going to sacrifice your beloved daughter, 'I would stand by my husband…I am a mother and a traitor…… I will be an old maid…like cowards she opted for silence (*(Shahraz, 2001) and at times they themselves questioned their honesty *as 'it become impossible to resume the role of a decent woman'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 123), *And How I was wind trapped I cannot say, I am shackled to the chains of your male domination your traditions* (Shahraz, 2001). At times they are shown greedy *as in 'becoming a chaudhraani with acres of land to his name and plenty of revenue coming.* (Shahraz, 2001).

Language is a powerful tool to generate the holistic image of a character but female writers tend to use derogatory terms depicting weak moral character and their social position. It is ironic that these writers have mostly compared female characters with non-animate beings like fruit, animals and other things. Hence reduced their status as being a commodity rather than a human being. However there is absence of any such construction for male characters despite the crimes in the novel they commit, mainly due to the element of power and authority associated with them. They apparently enjoy the element of power in every aspect. Such instances are easy to observe. Every minor act and quality of female is tended to convey negative meanings. Such a '*s*howling like wolves' (Durrani, 1998, p. 12), '*female cats….pulling them by tails…..tomcat among them'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 49), '*you are the peacock, I am just a dull brown peahen'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *53), 'body boneless like a snake',* (Durrani, 1998, p. *66), serpent in her rose garden (Shahraz, 2001), 'show yourself you rat'*

(Durrani, 1998, p. *74), 'trapped like a rabbit in a hunter's net''* (Durrani, 1998, p. 91*) 'You slow donkeys'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *98)…'wings like the birds, old cow'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *95), 'wounded baby deer'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *112), 'lamb for slaughter'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *127), 'wild boar or mad wolf, fat like pregnant pig'* (Durrani, 1998, p.138*), 'Piir's uthni (Piir's she camel), insect…dog……worms…..bull….hawk…..silverfish'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *195)….eagle* (Durrani, 1998, p. *193), 'I saw a large cow…..cow moored…..kissed the cow'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 224), '*claws in my son…..when the cat is away the house overrun by mice…haunted wounded animal. Barking… tied to a gilded cage (Shahraz,2001), Squeezed lemon'* (Durrani, 1998, p.*55), 'like an old date'* (Durrani, 1998, p. 123), *'sugar cane' (156) 'you look like a wet cloth wrung dry' (55), 'woman swaying like kites' (16), 'rot rose like vomit'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *49), 'hanging like a lose tooth'* (Durrani, 1998, p. *187), pluck another laduu from plate . Wedded to zamiin….I am not a pawn in a game of chess (Shahraz, 2001).*

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the characters in both novels are more driven by social norms and social position each gender enjoys in the society. Through the writings of these writers, we can figure out the critique and protest done by the female writers against the patriarchal society in Pakistan. However the choice of words, comparisons and introduction of characters by female writers questions the basic ideology that why didn't they portray female characters in a more refined way than male characters despite the novels seem to revolve around female characters as the actual protagonist. Hence gender portrayals here are a product of social life which is incorporated into the novel by dramatizing various characteristics, traits of these characters. Also these portrayals and character constructions seem to be based on a theory which sets to record its protest against the political and social spheres. They are restrained in the name of laws and by portraying such themes; there is a kind of protest against these very laws. The shift in the plot of the novels reveals this fact very clearly.

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