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**Tracing Pakistani Woman’s Political Voice in Kamila Shamsie’s *Broken Verses***

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**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to explore Kamila Shamsie’s Broken Verses, probing women’s empowerment and resistance against the socio-political oppressions during the three crucial decades of 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in Pakistan. Contending that Pakistan’s progressive intelligentsia during the aforementioned decades reacted against the repressive forces backed by establishment, the paper examines how Broken Verses highlights women’s voices, rewriting the role of traditional Pakistani woman and further broadening the latter’s significant part in the country’s politics. The paper explores how Shamsie’s women lead the progressive march, confronting the retrogressive forces working under Pakistan’s civil and military regimes and thereby, epitomizing the revolutionary role of modern Pakistani women breaking with all precedents of perseverance and valor in the country’s history of resistance. The study examines that Pakistani women withstand against state’s oppressions and suppressions of women’s voices throughout the novel projecting them as proponent of democracy.*

**Keywords:** Socio-Political Oppressions, Progressive March, Retrogressive Forces, Revolutionary Role

**Introduction**

The paper aims to scrutinize Pakistani women’s political activism and social participation in political arena. Women’s political alacrity elevates posterity’s prosperity and instigate in masses awareness regarding their “political rights”. (Abdul, 2022). Pakistan’s socio-political history overwhelms the conflicts of interest between the privileged and the deprived. Whereas, the privileged class interests have often been over-prioritised on the name of nation’s ideological custodianship and defense, the deprived class problems have generally been over-generalized on religious basset and patriotism. Also, Pakistan continues its journey for maturity of democracy during last three decades. Presently, it experiences emerging democracy and hybrid regime which pose “stagnation or setbacks” for women’s political participation. (Carothers, 2016). Establishing a fictional counter-narrative, the third generation contemporary Pakistani novelists in English attempt to emphasize the problems of the margin (deprived) in their novels. Pakistani English Novels (PENs) reflect “empowering gains” that portrays the questions about the potentially socio-political capabilities of women as equal to men. (Alexander, 2012). Pakistani novelist in English, Kamila Shamsie focuses on the role of politically motivated Pakistani women, recounting the deprived class struggles against the state oppressions and marginalization. Of Shamsie’s entire fictional works, *Broken Verses* (henceforth called *Verses*) brings to the forefront Pakistani women’s political activism and marching side by side with the revolutionary battery of Pakistan’s progressive intelligentsia. Female characters recount the socio-political persecutions during the three crucial decades of 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in Pakistan, *Verses* surveys the continued struggle of the oppressed classes deprived of their basic rights. The protagonist, Asaamani Inqilab, struggles for political empowerment in novel, though there is no “clear definition of women’s political empowerment. (Alexander, Bolzendahl & Jalalzai, 2016). The notion of political empowerment has been applied in ethno-politics, in which it has been considered to confidently “influence political attitudes” and examined whether political empowerment has the similar “constructive consequences for women” or not. (High-Pippert, & Comer, 1998).

In addition, certain historical events, in Pakistan’s history, such as secession of the country’s East wing from her West one, implementation of the 1973 Constitution and surging Islamization have

drastically impacted the destitute classes in general, but particularly women; who are being deprived from their due human rights by means of imposing on them undue restrictions and socio-political marginalization. Undeniably, the augmentation, in military power, has further worsen the social and political conditions throughout the country by influencing on political institutions and interference in democracy. Women culturally and religiously have been confined to domesticity and refrained from mainstream politics strategically that lead to their psychological depression and stagnation of thoughts. Nonetheless, Shamsie seemingly addresses women's socio-political issues of deprivation as well as re-writes about the progressive aptitudes and redeeming contributions of them in Pakistani society.

Contending that Pakistan's progressive intelligentsia, during the aforementioned decades, have reacted against the repressive forces and hydride regime that have been backed by establishment. *Verses* foregrounds the question of women's empowerment. The author negates about the traditional role of Pakistani women and broadens the significance in domains of politics and in society. Particularly, Hornset and de Soysa (2022) have argued that Pakistan's political empowerment many "boost human development" on real grounds. Leading the progressive march and political activism of women, *Verses*'s female characters confront the retrogressive forces working under Pakistan's civil and military regimes, they manifest the revolutionary role of modern Pakistani women by personifying their perseverance and valor in by stating their counter-narrative. Ranasinha, Ruvani (2012) refers to Shamsie's preoccupation with lineation of identities and emphasizing cultural identity by highlighting women political disposition through her female protagonists who unearth subtleties of life from history in modern feminists' writing. Contextualization of *Verses* identifies and traces women's political voices which have significant potentiality of contesting military's narrative of patriotism and highlighted the influences of military in political domains in Pakistan.

Women explore in Pakistan identity politics. Jopi Nyman (2011) foregrounds how Shamsie in *Verses* tends to highlight the notion of identity mixing "with politics by means of ideological conflicts and vacuums" (p.1). Jopi adds that one's identity leads to surface the different forms of socially sensitive tremors, particularly in such a country that is being notorious for "its male chauvinism, military dictatorship and civil strife." (pp. 3-12).

Seemingly, Sadia Hassan (2013) has highlighted the unresolved tragedy of a young woman, Aasmaani inqalab, protagonist in *Verses*, who is searching "for elusive answers about her life as she is haunted in her childhood, especially regarding the disappearance of her. Absolutely fearless activist mother, Samina Akram . . . [who] finds herself complete broken down after the mysterious death of her intimate (the Poet). She starts questioning the beliefs that "she has so fiercely fought for all her life." (*Verses*, p. 46). More to the point, Pakistani English Literature worldly gains fames that fumes particularly "women's progress and depicts their persistent nature for raising voices against social inequality and political victimization." (Weiss, 1999). In this respect, Shimmie has shown her enthusiasm and spirit to portray socio-political "marginalization and problems of Pakistani females who have in lingered so far." (Alexander, Bolzendahl, & Jalalzai, 2016).

Pakistan, being a culturally conservative and multi-ethnic country, contains diverse political views and cultural diversity. Its women are being considered as inactive in politics but in reality they are immensely in active in political arena. As Pakistani society generally believes in the feudal system, patriarchal structure of society and hybrid regime, as a deep state (democracy influenced or controlled by establishment), which historically victimize women in mainstream of politics. (Aksoy, Carter, & Wright, 2012). *Broken Verses* analytically spreads political voices of Pakistani women whose discussions and political debates indicate their intellectual sagacity and expressions for political dominance leading to social equality of women in Pakistan. Shamsie chooses female protagonists who proliferate their personal desires of political activism to have social contributions at national and global levels.

### **Hypothesis**

Consequent to the similarly mentioned feminist and nationalist patterns of socio-political activism, Pakistan's political history since Independence has been depicting democratic proponents' victimization and women's persecutions that cause their marginalization.

However silencing the voices of political dissidents has become in an imminent challenge for establishment to curb with due to globalization and politicization factors. Arguably, Pakistani women's inclinations indicate their political maturity and political alacrity. Previously, Pakistan

women have surpassed the political constraints of the state's socio-political history. It can be considered as an attempt to trace women's political voices that highlight state's oppressions and suppressions of its civilians through stigmatized discourses. Pakistani women's political activism is contended in this study. It has been exhibited a substantial predisposition towards resisting the extra-judicial killing phenomena by representing themselves as victimized and by bringing women's alternative discourses of the deprived class to the multitudes of Pakistan.

### **Research Objectives**

- 1:** To explore Pakistani women's withstanding voices for socio-political change in the country
- 2:** To highlight that in contemporary phase Pakistani women's political perceptions mature

### **Research Question**

Grounding on the above hypothesis, this paper attempts to answer the following question:

How and to what extent *Broken Verses* attempts to depict Pakistani women's political voices by representing and encountering state's atrocities from the standpoint of the victimized?

### **Literature review**

Women access to politics and power that have augmented enormously their social activism and political participation. However, they are considered not equal to men, who influence over and exercise of political authority in them. Women raise their political voices for empowerment and equality in Pakistan in recent decades that represent their political involvement. Quratulain Shirazi's (2018) has highlighted the relevance political impacts and social influences of glocalization on Pakistani women in Shamsie's novel. Both politics and globalization have accelerated women's socio-political activism in Pakistan. Also, Herbert (2011) has argued regarding "political activities and social images of women who adore indulging themselves in political dispensations in *Broken Verses*. He has also depicted "women's politicization" in Pakistan as an emerging trend. Bruce King (2011) has studied the multifaceted themes of Shamsie's novels comprising of Pakistan's politics, nonconformities of women to cultural norms, desiring for politicization and democratization of women by referring to struggle for civil supremacy in security state. Besides, Sadia Hassan frequently reiterates that Pakistani women's intellectual endeavours, political promptness and social engagement have the dominant feature in her novel which signifying their political voices in "context of country's socio-political ambience." (2013: pp.1-3).

Accordingly, Robin West (2019) has argued that Pakistani female writers have projected "understanding of tactics" that cause their persecutions. Hence, women have matured both political potentialities and perceived vulnerabilities to get become visible in mainstream politics. Shamsie's *Broken Verses* depicts women's relationship management that influences their political activism and helps in understanding political disruptions or dispensations. Furthermore, Gohar Karim Khan (2011) has perceived multiple layers of Zia's Islamization (imposed doctrine) that have marginalized women and caused socio-political decadence in Pakistan's political history. Discrimination and marginalization of them lead to political stagnancy. These layers of political victimization have given birth to the eruption of terrorism and submerged voices of dissents in politics. Indeed, Jopi Nyman (2011) has studied women's identity and politicization in *Broken Verses* that represents the true nature of Pakistan's politics. Saira Shafique and Munazza Yaqoob (2012) have critically analysed the socio-political aspects of the novel that include the "use[s] of intertextuality" and dimensions of political voices of women. Daniela Vitolo (2016) has specified political events that shaped and influenced performance of women in politics and society. Claire Gail Chambers (2018) has construed *Broken Verses* including politicization and dynamics of women's social activism that project their democratic nature in Pakistan. Then, Paul Veyret (2018) has critically revealed political facets and interpretations regarding Pakistani novelists who empower female protagonists to endeavor for equality and equity simultaneously. Muhammad Shoib (2019) states that readers' attention towards the intricate relationship towards women's intention for socio-political empowerment in Shamsie's novel. These researchers have identified that *Broken Verses* has the features of tracing women's political voices. In contemporary phase, women social mobilization and political participations become at peak for establishing of democracy in the country.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Replicating the socio-political aspects of society, *Verses* mirrors the individual and collective lives of women that reflect the contesting political narratives and discourses in Pakistan's politics. The novel highlights women's independence and political calamity through enforced disappearances of political

dissents. Shamsie's female protagonists emerge as proponents of democracy and civil supremacy. Women in *Verses* become perceivable as dissents who challenge the trends of atrocity leading to contestation and socio-political activism of protagonists (Aasmaani and Samina Akram) in the novel. Aasmaani, a principal character in the novel, idealizes how her mother (Samina Akram) and the Poet (male character) have defied the oppressive regimes and state's suppression of democratic political voices. Recounting the Poet's death due to resisting versification which mobilize masses against state's terrorism or persecutions. Aasmaani remembers the incident which has anguished her agony. Aasmaani immensely refers to maltreatment and harassment of democratic females' voices by stating that the Poet's poetry has instigates her. The protagonist indicates that she was "a coward", but "there were all those people who were turned to flame" by the poet's death (*Verses*, p.208). Also, she mentions that the Poet who "wrote and marched and resisted" and "above all, resisted all those tyrannies" of state involves in "...[Fighting] against" proponents of democracy. (ibid, p.209). The novel projects the insights of indigenous women to become politically active and withstand against establishment despotisms in Pakistan. Especially during the era of political plight, Zia's regimes (Islamized dictatorship and weaponized religion) has spoiled the true beauty of democracy and plunged the country in socio-political dungeon and deprivation of women particularly.

This veracity enflames not only Samina Akram but also her daughter (Aasmaani) to pursue insightful web of political relations (enforced disappearances) that are portrayed in the novel. Besides, the un-conventional relation of Samina Akram with the Poet deviates from the normal intimacy of women in Pakistan. The novel might be an exploration of true mystery because an individual finds out state's injustice and involvement in imposed extra-judicial killings of political opponents and proponents of democracy in the country, which becomes notorious for human trafficking across the globe. If the individual raises their voice/s against illegitimate extra-judicial killings or enforced disappearances, their destination is particularly dungeon or death. Even their death reason becomes unknown for Pakistani women who audaciously endeavour to draw attention towards such inhuman acts in broader socio-political levels. This tendency terrorizes the entire public who encounter the fear while withstanding against establishment and raising their political concerns against intelligence agencies as the lucid instances are "the Poet's death and Samina Akram's own disappearance?" (ibid, p.52). The protagonists raise their concerns of masses respecting militia's interference Pakistan's democracy which becomes weaker and weaker rights from its established era. *Verses* implies that such imposed injustice on Pakistani people is not a sagacious strategy rather than letting democracy flourish for national prosperity and posterity. This will spread positive image of Pakistan across the globe.

Likewise, *Verses* profoundly comprises of personal sway of women's sentiments that lead to females' dynamic political participation and social mobilization in society. It becomes certain that women are perceived generally with emotional intensity which magnetizes Aasmaani's resistance while being "discontent rife in the country over Ayub Khan's constitution and its Basic Democracy scheme that made a joke of democracy the poet was either a brave or politically man who could publish such inflammatory verses". (ibid, p.85). Seemingly, generals become disreputable by meaning of spoiling true essence and sense of democracy in Pakistani society. As, history becomes witness that traces the cases of enforced disappearances which are immensely to be believed an interminable atrocities. Shamsie's social and intellectual spheres revolve around her political stature in political domains that represent woman's autonomy in public and political circles. In actual fact, author's stance regarding Pakistani women who work for true democracy. Aasmaani is potentially salubrious for empowerment of women and political activism in the entire narrative. She desires for socio-political dominance and independence in society. Indeed, Pakistani establishment has created detrimental impediments and political quagmire through creation of unprecedented dramatization to divert multitudes' attention from development in mainstream politics.

These identical situations put Aasmaani's and her mother drive to counter the status quo of state and its narrative of sole protector military that involves in disappearing democratic proponents. She continues to trace out the reasons and routs of disappearance. Moreover, she tries to execute the hindrances that have been engineered by the hidden forces, Establishment constructs political chemistry to entrap autonomous voices of dissents as she states that "freedom of speech was all very well. However, there was no need to exercise it against a government" (ibid, p.54). In third world countries, majority stands with injustice not with justice seemingly in Pakistan where might becomes

right and right vanishes in the air. The more the protagonist insists upon familial fondness, the more she realizes state's atrocities on its people. She profoundly experiences . antagonistic establishment's reactions that victimize or marginalize her despite her "valour of resistance; which is considered as confrontation in modern world". (Rowbotham, 2014).

The author revisits Pakistan's last three decades richly smears the country's image internationally due to military intrusion in democracy and influence in parliamentary affairs. These phases of literary grandeur, political spirit and social vision become devoured in the dust due to such intrusions and interference in mainstream politics. The novel explores the relationship of protagonist assailed by memories of her mother who raises her political concerns against intelligence agencies and their roles in silencing of democratic voices in Pakistan. Moreover, people will not be deprived owing to mass media; that turns the world into global village. Besides, Aasmaani wisely decides the platform of television to address the social issues publically as "It's such a powerful medium". (*Verses*, p.27). Her voice is powerfully inculcated in the minds of public.

The thinking of masses has been imprisoned across the country through media propaganda strategies but the author highlights the naked truth of Pakistan's politics. Nothing is so significant than excessive use of media for speaking out social violence upon citizen of the country. Similarly democratic stance of women. Feminism is considered as liberation from social and political chains limiting women in society. (Phoenix, 2022). Deeply, this is the sign of wisdom that protagonist profoundly prioritizes media because of socio-cultural and socio-political constraints. Not only resistance of Aasmaani's mother but also of her, which is posing challenges for establishment and its associations of mutual interests affecting patriotic and democratic masses consistently in Pakistan. Due to the globalization and commercialization, female agency is reflected in the foundation of nation and media as the forth pillar of state. The selection of social media platform by the protagonist for reaching her voice to public by Aasmaani. Her this act is perceived as the pragmatic approach to construct her justifiable argument to people. Adaption of media in a kind of resistance to conservative norms. It also highlights the modern thinking of female contradicting socio-political outrages on women. (Jackson, 2022).

Pakistan's earlier epoch of ostentatious spirit and phantom for democracy have devoured deliberately. Aasmaani has been assaulted by the reminiscences of the 1970s and 80s once the country could be formed to resist and rear political speeches as initiation of democracy and development in the country. During government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the elected government has been dethroned by General Zia ul-Haq, military dictator, who has instrumentalized religion for remaining in power and introduced militancy across the border with Afghanistan. The impenitent disappearances, exiles, imprisonments, and "solitary confinements of political opponents have physically and mentally tortured by establishment". (Muhammad, Feroze, & Mubashar, 2022). Relevantly, the critics and analysts who have censured establishment that "killed -and tortured, to each other revolutionary poets lesson - and government agents entered his house and burnt his poems." (*Verses*, p.173). Obliteration and uprooting of political rights and democratic opinions of public in society which has been deprived from flourishing of democracy being perished at larger extent in Pakistan. Then, extreme violence, custodian bereavements have distressed the public in the state. Establishment has continued to stigmatize inhabitants as anti-state's elements and slogans proliferated in the country. Agencies involvements in submergence of political voices have indulged nation in internal political chaos and dispensations—leading to state's isolation or women's marginalization that have caused notorious representation of military in international forums. Pakistani women writers depict the instances of state's suppression in their fictional writings and non-fictional writing. (Shah & Riaz, 2022).

Shamsie un-covers the socio-political facts against which females have raised their voices without apprehensions of military's forced-trafficking of them. Females fell deeply the sentiments and miseries of state's politics. However, establishment has caused social deterioration by dictatorship and hybrid regime in Pakistan. The writer continues her advocacy for strengthening democracy in Pakistan through her liberal and educated female protagonist as "...[S]he fights unjust laws, or dictatorial governments". (*Verses*, p.139). To come for the magnificent return of Samina, her mother, Aasmaani's conformist perceptions deny her death because of her recreations to Poet's disappearance. Besides, the reasons of his killing have become his poetry [contradicting/criticizing generals] that grounds social mobilizations and political revolt against the state through his inflammatory verses in novel. Considering extra-judicial killings in Pakistan makes weaker democracy, which has been tasted

as acrimony. Even, the derailment of democracy has created blows right after its initiations in Pakistan. In fact, the political anxieties in crowds have astounded the society that no individuals prefer to discuss politics as “if someone came in here and started to talk to me of politics when I have reading Richard 2, I will show them away.” (ibid, p.202). Although, a number of social elites, public figures, intellectuals and contemporary writers have severely “jeopardized their lives to withstand against non-democratic mind-set in the country”. (Stern, 2001). The bravery of females in high-context spheres of Pakistan spurn military totalitarianism—even losing their lives in the narrative. Besides, radical nationalism and fecund resistance for efficaciously democratic country have not been dispersed without the expenses of women's lives and advocates of democracy. For example, Aasmani and Samina's characters represent the effort of women by rejecting the military supremacy in Pakistan. Yet, armed forces takeover intimidate on masses both physically and psychologically. Hence the individuals' struggles initiate for civilians' empowerment—despite military persistent pushes for influence. Both Samian and Aasmaani characters and “acts pose liberation and resistance that could be identical to contemporary Aurat March for women's freedom”. (Nasir, Riaz, & Mirza, 2021).

Analyzing *Broken Verses* title significantly signifies different types of extortions on common masses in Pakistan. Along with the escalations of politically sultry situation, women's exercise their self-confidence which depicts their morale and delineate their desires for finding out the veracities behind their socio-political acts. Females should not undervalue themselves and values the lives of other by designating their political activism in politics and sense of humanity in broader perspectives. However, the concerns of scrutinizing the cases of enforced disappearance have become unpredictable. The inscrutable occurrence of enforced disappearances, in the country, has indicated that the autonomous and loyal individuals have jeopardized their lives for strengthening democracy. Indeed, establishment labels such individuals with anti-state elements or traitors (high frequency terminology used in Pakistani politics). This cause women's double-marginalization and socio-political victimization. Thus, women realize their responsibilities of self-protection and searching for truth as “[H]er voice turn squeaky its rhythms truncated " I have found your dirty secret.” (*Verses*, p.239). The resultant anguishes, contestations and distress are because of Aasmani's recognition of her mother's loss. So, she moves through agony and anxiety throughout her life, the novel highlights women's intuition of political understanding as well as social activism in Pakistan, in General Zia's regime particularly. She depicts the plights of nation as well as addresses her political flights referring to the consequences faced by the political opponents immensely.

The novel is seemed to be a perceptive meditation regarding the political fiber about which women's characters have revolved into the webs of socio-political vulnerabilities as depicted in not only Aasmaani's but also in her mother's actions, Samina Akram's characters. Both desire to pursue the unconventional death of the Poet—perhaps by agencies. Seemingly, these issues of politics are perceived as multifarious complexities which may be encountered by the pursuers. Both mother and daughter adapt the deviating style of chasing atrocities of establishment. It could be analyzed as the core theme of *Broken Verses*. The selected novel further depicts that Pakistani women re-imagine themselves in political arena as “The modern woman's preferred method of political engagement.” (*Verses*, p.31). Correspondingly, younger generation of women do prefer resistance and public reaction against military despotism that has been appeared as in-alienated bond concerning the unrestricted conduct of the government to agonize the innocent civilians. Explicitly, Samina and Aasmani greatly revolve around as candid opposition to the government actions of persecution that ultimately lead to mysterious assault and enigmatic deaths of Pakistanis in society. Women's desperate struggles for democracy cementation become firmly for public rights or political freedom that still has remained unsolved in Pakistan as “The problem of reconciling the burnt poems with the story of a faked death conventional wisdom has it that a government agency killed the poet because they feared the effect his new poetry collection would have an a nation which had so recently received just a tiny reminder of the taste of democracy and was clamor for more.” (ibid, p.173). In tyrannical regimes which have no acceptance of democratic leaders who would always be in frequent imprisonment by political opponents and military generals. S/he may be exiled or may face inexplicable death and disfiguration. Unquestionably, Pakistani women realize to become political active due to spurring the socio-political misadventures and -cultural constraints.

## Conclusion

*Broken Verses* reveals unprecedented involvement of Pakistani women in politics. Particularly, women negate state's narrative of enforced disappearances (missing persons) by name of patriotism; and impose cornering of political activists. The furious conditions of state obligate Aasmaani to pursue the unjustifiable atrocities on her mother [Samina Akram], who encounters martial law and its imposed unbearable consequences. Kamila Shamsie seemingly focuses on the origination of establishment oppressions through victimizing both men and women in Pakistan. Female characters play socio-politically effervescent role by merging their personal associations amid inspiring journey and escalation in Pakistan's politics. Besides, the novel moves from household's love to country's desertion and un-acceptance of armed forces' regimes. Female characters have categorically gainsaid the imposed and hybrid form of democracy in the country. Additionally, Pakistani women have disclosed the probability of agency involvement in unknown assailants on democratic proponents. Even her mother, Smina Akram, bravely continues resistance, as a reformist, to military autocracy, which has influence in changing regimes in country's political history. The excesses of government secretive repressions have been questioned by women from state's authorities. *Broken Verses* brings to light the missing persons' case to public by voicing and depicting political women. It is fascinatingly multidimensional literary work for changing the public minds to know the covert hands that have dynamic roles in dissemination of violence in society and victimization of opponents by the name patriotism in Pakistan. The novel has posed Pakistani women's action-oriented roles desiring for challenging establishment narrative of patriotism in contemporary era. Shamsie seems to mobilize females through projecting women's voices against established mind-set so as to season the society with change and social movements leading to women's empowerment and equality.

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