



RESEARCH PAPER

Distortion of Cultural Anthropology in Haji's *The Writing on My Forehead*: A Feminist Analysis

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 09, 2021 Accepted: August 28, 2021 Online: September 01, 2021 Keywords: Cultural Anthropology Dichotomy, Hierarchy, Pakistani Women, Stereotype	The current research paper intends to explore the culturally built up stereotypes scrutinizing the role of women in Nafisa Haji's <i>The Writing on My Forehead</i> (2009). It investigates the troubling state of Pakistani women as the victims of socio-cultural hegemony. Saira as a protagonist of the text reciprocates as an icon of protest against constructed cultural ideologies inclined towards gender dichotomous norms. Lila Abu Lughod in her essay <i>Writing against Culture</i> (2008) applies an operational technique upon culture distorting such falsely internalized cultural trends. She argues that culture appears as a major tool in the formation of <i>self/other</i> binary, serving as the foundation of <i>male/female</i> distinction thus carrying with it the baggage of hierarchy. Lila's work not only out steps the horizons of cultural geography and monopoly but also interrogates further the roots of culture bringing into question, the reality of culture thus challenging the existing history of culture by writing against culture. Haji fabricates an intricate web representing the familial system rooted in cultural paradigms. By introducing the cultural calamities as Cultural Schizophrenia, the imbalance of women's right in accordance to cultural constraints has been critically exposed.
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Introduction

I am the one
you crushed
with the weight of custom
and tradition,
not knowing
that light cannot
be hidden in darkness.

(Naheed, 2009, p.34).

The current research tends to highlight the identity crisis and the inadequate acknowledgement of women's capabilities framed within cultural swamp of Pakistani

society. The gender dichotomous and misogynist societal approaches under the name of cultural paradigms have made the survival for women an unending battle. The unsolvable dispute of equal rights for the women has led to a confined and a strengthened patriarchal setup. The research signifies the contradiction in the parameters of judgment for men and women, where terms like shame and immorality are associated with woman, whereas honour and dignity with a man; symbolizing the so-called protectors as the carriers of sheer responsibility of women's integrity and protection.

Through the propagating images of Pakistani culture, Nafisa Haji, has painted a critical scenario through the protagonists of the text *The Writing on My Forehead*, revealing the conflicts faced by women who are struggling to fulfill their personal dreams and striving hard to survive in the society. Haji's protesting figure Saira represents the hardships of a woman's journey where she is at the constant battle to fulfill all the cultural constructions and norms to become an acceptable woman of the society with the mental approach similar to Curtis, "I will be reborn. I will be free. I will be the girl I was always meant to be." (Curtis, 2020, p.79).

Saira is demonstrated as a symbol of rejection towards all such false societal notions, values and obligations imposed upon women. The novel tends to elucidate the alarming role of families and societies in shattering women's dreams and ambitions. Women residing in such a stereotypical culture are therefore exploited enough to live their lives within the parameters of societal and familial acceptability. Haji portrays the character of Saira, an intractable and stubborn girl with high ambitions of becoming a journalist. Her aim is defined as to fly and conquer the life, to live like an unstoppable and uncontrollable girl instead of being strangled by the strands of cultural manipulation. Her figure denies the archetype that marriage is the only destiny and symbol of success in a woman's life.

The text demonstrates the common issues faced by the women having their roots clung to Pakistani culture comprised of various unacceptable yet ethical obligations for women. The aspect of gender dichotomy is vividly exhibited in the text through various incidents and characters. Haji describes the horrifying elements of such a constructed culture which posits such a patriarchal setup where men reside within no boundaries and women struggle to attain acceptability and identity, the very notion highlighted in *Manifesta. Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (2010), "It's not surprising that we haven't achieved equality." (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p.80).

This gender dichotomy is used as a cultural tool to defame women and drift them towards periphery. The very notion of love, in case of men is considered quite an ordinary act as a result of physical attraction or compassionate feelings but in case of women, it brings shame and indignity, moreover triggering the urge of women's protectors to slaughter her for the sake of honour. These troubling and massive issues are incorporated in text through satirical and humorous lenses but symbolically they're depicting the falsifying crux of the entire cultural setup.

The text signifies the chaos between the expectations of the family and the dreams of an individual of that family, where the individual stands as the helpless woman who has to sacrifice her very own desires, goals, and bow to the familial

obligations in order to be acceptable by the society. This results in depressive disorders consequently leading towards, “a tendency to ‘self-silence’, loss of self.” (Rippon, 2020, p.296). Haji tries to portray the fearless protagonist who serves not only as an epitome of optimism, propagating the traits of courage and protest, but also a figure radiating the power to dream big by breaking the oppressive cultural shackles; which are mainly fabricated ideologies discriminating the roles of good and bad women of the society. Haji elucidates various characters and incidents as a perfect relevance of all the scenarios faced by Pakistani women in their socio-cultural setup.

Literature Review

The research mainly focuses upon exposing the hegemonic cultural tools fabricated in order to demoralize women. The misuse of culture through manipulative societal agendas leads towards the subjugation of women and their traumatic suffrage. Therefore the study not only unveils the suppressive cultural tools but also attacks the falsely constructed and hierarchal cultural setup. In *Understanding Culture (2001)* E.B. Tylor, a British anthropologist, “defined culture in evolutionary term, Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist defined culture as a learned phenomenon, Clifford Geertz informed us that culture is relative, nothing special, and the result of local storytelling” (Kendall, 2001, p.8). Taylor’s cultural model, being evolutionary in its nature, “cultures are not static but continually changing”, (Jafri, 2008, p.7) represented the idea that how change and progress in any society is inevitable, resulting in the continuous changing form of culture from one period to another.

This revolutionary system of culture which varies from society to society gives birth to the notion of cultural superiority. A critic goes to an extent that even the cities of Pakistani are not real they are, “cultural construction” (p.43). In *Understanding Culture (2001)*, the demonstration of the superiority system, is elaborated through the cultural manipulation through colonialism, “just as the West could claim to be culturally superior to the rest of the world, so it was thought that similar processes could be uncovered to explain the cultural superiority of men over women, whites over blacks, rich over poor, law-abiders over criminals” (Kendall, 2001, p.9).

Culture and Feminism

Under the discussion of deconstructing binary oppositions in *Postfeminisms(1997)* Julia Kristeva while arguing about the constructed femininity states:

“To posit all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine is precisely the move that enables patriarchal powers to define not femininity but all women as marginal the symbolic order and society” (Brooks, 1997, p. 125).According to Kristeva, women lose more due to the cultural economy and hegemony as she says that culture “is immovably and exclusively masculine” (p. 127).

In the beginning of the book *Gender in the Mirror- Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency (2002)* while talking about internalized oppression, individuality and identity,

Diana remarks beautifully, "People do not choose their gender (or, for that matter, their race, ethnicity, sexuality, stage of life, or class). These are thrust upon us." (Meyers, 2002, p.18). Women's identities being gendered in patriarchal cultures erodes their capability to function as a self-determining agents.

The book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (2009) leads us to the ways to put an end to the brutal treatment which is a shallow cultural illusion, relying on no true spirit of culture or rights of women. It also proposes ways to eradicate the particular built up cultural notions to devalue women and to carry out such steps in order to maintain peace and gender equality, "if girls get a chance, in the form of an education or microloan, they can be more than baubles or slaves" (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009, p. 13).

Cultural feminists tend to differentiate "sex and gender...femaleness and femininity" (p.7) while femaleness refers to her biological anatomy, and femininity refers to identification as a gender opposite to male not consolidated within the boundaries of sexual objectification which is a chaos created by cultural confusion for amalgamating sexual traits with social identity.

Nafisa Shah while expressing male's integrity in *Honour Unmasked: Gender Violence, Law and Power in Pakistan* (2017) remarks "ghairat-a timeless, natural and therefore unquestionable ideology of honour" (Shah, 2017, p.1). In her book, Shah elucidates the term *karo-kari* having literal meaning as 'black man and black woman' as a custom which sanctions severe punishment like death or eviction to couples accused of sexual involvements. According to the data obtained via analytical research, "in most cases the murders of women take place within the family, and the killers are either husbands, brothers, fathers or other kin" (p.123). It is observed that men somehow escape the punishment and are often released whereas the women are hunt down and slaughtered down as the number of accused men who are released through some manipulative legal process are "roughly equal to the total number of women and men killed"(p.123).

Khaled Hosseini, a remarkable novelist and physician, as well as the writer of tremendous novels like *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *And the Mountains Echoed*, resonate through his works and characters, the spirit of culture and life. Demonstrating the essential elements of the novel *The Writing on my Forehead*, he narrates:

Nafisa Haji has written a moving meditation on the meaning of family, tradition and the ties that bind. The writing on my forehead is lyrical and touching. It a story of mother and daughters, and a story of a young Muslim woman at crossroads, shaped by the forces of her past, her religion, her roots, her culture and her own determined will. (Hosseini, 2009).

Theoretical Paradigm

Lila Abu Lughod in her critical essay *Writing Against Culture* in *The Cultural Geography Reader* (2008) edited by Timothy Oakes, Patricia L. Price, dismantles the entire foundation of cultural setup when she comments that culture itself serves as a catalyst in the formation of self/other binary, falsifying the roots of culture to the extent of revealing it as a mere construction. *The Cultural Geography Reader* assimilates fifty-two classic and contemporary abridged readings, comprising various contributions from many socialists, anthropologists, writers, including Lila Abu Lughod.

In order to establish an understanding regarding the relationship of assimilation of culture and feminism, the meanings of both the terms should be reviewed. Raymond Williams, a social historian and an influential figure in the realm of cultural studies, pinpoints culture having three broader uses, Firstly, as a noun which describes the process of “intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development since the eighteenth century (similar to the term civilization); second, a noun indicating a particular way of life and third, a noun describing works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Williams, 2008, p.15).

Williams best works include *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961), *Marxism and Literature* (1973). All his works throw light upon “the social history of the ideas, practices and meanings that together makeup culture.” (Williams, 2008, p.16). According to Williams, Culture appears as a ground of social struggle, where the working of social relationships takes place. Williams’ great contribution towards cultural theory is the emergence of the concept of the *structure of feeling*, which offers an evident description of social change occurring at broader scales through the understanding of people’s place-based experiences. Hence depicting how strongly the experiences and activities of people living in a society vary with the place where they reside and feeling that they comprise.

The Latin root word of culture; *colere*, proposes a wide range of meanings: “inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship” (p.16). It is quite difficult to encompass such a broad-meaning term into a few words to attain the true understanding of what culture actually is and so its meanings have been gone through a process of gradual modification. The meaning of the term Culture in English was being developed into a more modern sense while undergoing social and intellectual movements till eighteenth century.

In her essay *Writing Against Culture*, Lila Abu Lughod elaborates how culture resides under the pressure of Self/Other dichotomy. She argues that culture, “remains too laden with the assumptions of a divide between the self (subject) and other (object)” (Lughod, 2008, p.50). Here she clearly points out that it is culture itself that gives birth to this self and other binary. Her comment, “culture is the tool for creating this self-other binary” (p.50), demonstrates that the crux of identity crisis lies mainly in such culturally constructed hierarchal relationships in a society. Her comment further explains her feminist perspectives that hoe culture being a tool of creation of binaries serves as a foundation of the most recognizing gender dichotomy of male/female binary.

Lila's work steps outside the horizons of cultural geography and interrogates further, the roots of culture and brings into question, the reality of culture thus developing a critical analysis to challenge the already existing history of culture by writing against culture. She "actively works against it by developing critical challenges to the idea of culture as we know it today" (p.51). The essentiality of her work can be analyzed by the capability, "of her work bridging feminist theory, national identity and popular culture". (p.51). As her views act as a bridge way, they highlight the fact it is the culture that conforms the identity of an individual especially of a woman, and there is also a hand of culture which manipulates the process of identity making, to such an extent of deterioration, that it leaves a hollow and porous frame of female identity.

Lila writes, "From Simone De Beauvoir on, it has been accepted that women have been the other to men's self." (p.52) whereas the movement of feminism has been continuously striving to attain the individual's status of becoming "selves and subjects rather than objects and men's others." (p.52). This issue of hierarchal prejudice of selfhood or subject hood emerges from two reminders proposed by feminist theory. The first significant notion is about the nature of self. It is to be noted that self is always a construction, one can never consider it naturally existing for it is always built up by society as Lila comments as "The self is always a construction, never a natural or found entity, even if it has that appearance." (p.53). The second important aspect is the instability between the relationship of self and other as Lila portrays, "the process of creating a self through opposition to an Other, always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference" (p.53), including gender, race, class.

Hence, the cultural feminism tends to dismantle the culturally constructed framework. As Lila pinpoints, "This valorization by cultural feminists, like reverse orientalist, of the previously devalued qualities attributed to them may be provisionally useful in forging a sense of unity and in waging struggles of empowerment." (Lughod, 2008, p.55). Cultural feminists tend to overlook the connections between both the sides of their binary division and attempt to define each other. Secondly, they overlook the differences within each category i.e. class, race, sexuality etc. Cultural feminism emphasize on ignoring the differences which are constructed historically and keep on changing with time. It aims to, "rely on notions of authenticity and the return to positive values not represented by the dominant other." (p.56).

Analytical Discussion

"Right and Wrong are questions of the mind, separate from emotions, which can be slippery to live by." (Haji, 2009, p.86).

Lughod's ideas in *Writing Against Culture* (2008) purely depict the suppressive cultural functionality to formulate binaries promoting the constructed traditional difference of superiority and inferiority between men and women. The protagonists or the leading women represent a liberating shift from the patriarchal societal mindset embedded with oppressive constraints through their decisions and actions. The texts enlightens us with innumerable societal issues developed under cultural umbrella. Such problematic issues make the lives of Pakistani women quite hard because they have to strive competitively to attain rights, education, employment, decision power, recognition, fame, and respect in this man dominating setup.

Haji has tried to deconstruct certain socio-cultural stereotypes by unveiling the agenda behind such chaotic labels essentially associated with women. The novel focuses upon the portrayal of a state of rebellion and obedience through the sisters, Saira and Ameena, having a Pakistani brought up. Despite of living in America, Haji has depicted their parent's admirable efforts to inculcate Pakistani cultural traits in both of their daughters. The novel presents the lapse of ideologies distinguishing old and new generation, whereas the gap is carefully fulfilled by the end of the plot, through intrigued parental realization of daughter's identity and freedom. Shamsie points out, "age-old sub continental values which are no longer considered absolute by peers in Pakistan: obedience, respectability and conformity" (Haji, 2017, p.462).

Haji has not failed to jot down the disturbing societal issues, under cultural umbrella, causing an oscillatory survival for women. Through the incident of 9/11, Haji has illustrated the chaotic consequences faced by the Muslim women practicing cultural beliefs in their lives. Haji has not only presented an intricate web of traditional and familial obligations, but also put forth the real and constructed avenues as a tool of cultural hegemony to strengthen patriarchal grounds and thrusting the women towards submissiveness.

The state of difference between women and men is archived since childhood as Saira elaborates in perplexity, "I was not too young then to question the logic of that moral...why boys weren't subject to the same rules." (Haji, 2009, p.7). Haji has portrayed the societal definition of Marriage, confining it as, "the journey to becoming a woman and most importantly, the transfer of power from one *mehram* to another. When the burden of responsibility that men bear-the mantle of protection-passes from a father to a husband." (p.74). Haji illustrates the horrible drawback of Pakistani society where the individuals, especially women, who undergo the universal quest of survival between self and society, "we have to care what people think, we live among people, around people, in the midst of people" (p.75-76).

Haji depicts the societal reality through grandmother Adeeba's sentiments, who desires a different yet prosperous and dignified future for her granddaughter Saira:

Girls married of before they become women, like cows at an auction. Before they are old enough to understand what the world is about and what it has to offer. That there is more to life than breeding and birthing. But not for you the same old story. (Haji, 2009, p.29).

Haji highlights the acknowledgment of cracking identity of Pakistani women through various illustrations in her text. As Zia's gender policies elaborated, "That women were, literally and figuratively, the properties of their families, tribe, cast or community" (Toor, 2011, p.163).

Conclusion

The research accentuates the laborious efforts of Pakistani women in order to acquire justice and independency through Saira's rebellious character. The only way projected for the attainment of freedom and rights is to breakdown the socio-cultural

umbilical cord as well as to deviate from the forced silenced attributes. Through the vigorous character of Saira, the quest between ultimate freedom and societal confinement is clearly elaborated. Saira portrays the innumerable unheard and suppressive voices of Pakistani women, who remain in the constant battle of acquiring rights and justice within this patriarchal set-up. Majority of the women are enforced to adopt silenced behavioral attributes in the fear of societal degradation and humiliation. The research signifies the various grave and controversial issues and traumatized phases of sexual intercourses and pregnancy. At the same time, it focusses upon the essentiality of women's chastity whereas men are excluded from such grounds of morality inspection.

Haji's text unfolds the troubling state of Pakistani women as the victims of societal and cultural supremacy. She fabricates an intricate web representing the familial system enrooted in cultural paradigms. By introducing the cultural calamities as Cultural Schizophrenia, the misbalance of women's right in accordance to cultural constraints has been critically exposed. The discriminatory nature of implementation of societal rules for men and women are unveiled. The text symbolizes the basic issues faced by women in terms of not only education and marriage, but also when it comes to decision making, working and living independently in one's personal space. The exposure of too much freedom, is regarded as a threatening state to society. Strong women with high intellect tend to offer a threat to the patriarchal society and its conservative, suppressive ideologies.

In this strong patriarchal setup, the representation of an idealized woman relies upon the basis of her physical and anatomical traits, form and color, virginity and obediency patterns etc. Another inappropriate yet significant feature of our masculine structure is association of woman's love with immorality. Love marriages and honor killings are the most emerging conflicts of our society. The cultural disorientation towards marriages to be occurred only within the same caste systems, has ruined the harmony and equilibrium of the society. Girls who marry for love's sake, are not only tagged as whores and sluts, but also disowned and in some cases murdered to maintain the family's honour.

The disassociation of pertinent cultural values, and the unnecessary promotion of falsely constructed values have generated various loopholes in the identity and status of women, as well as a question mark to true cultural ideologies. The text illustrates the horrific and rigid boundaries of morality and immorality for women as well as punishments if an individual transgresses the societal restraints. The aim of the writer is clearly depicted through the development of daring and courageous character like Saira, who acts not only as an icon of rebel, but also as an aura of strength and multi-dimensionality in order to provoke the silenced voices to muster up courage and attain distinguished identity and freedom in the patriarchal battle of survival.

The research explores essential ways to deconstruct the falsely created cultural ideologies based upon the dichotomous and misogynist stereotypes, dehumanizing women in all aspects of lives. The purpose of the feminist oriented research through the lenses of this captivating Pakistani text is to provoke a sense of enlightenment and responsibility amongst the society and to dismantle the stabilized patriarchal grounds which are downgrading the rights and positions deserved by Pakistani women. It puts

forth the devastating consequences emerging due to gender dichotomy on the grounds of cultural manipulation and emphasizes a need to demolish such deceptively constructed traits which are not only leading the women to dwell in periphery but also extinguishing their rights and personal freedom.

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