

# Resilience Unveiled: Navigating Female Identity and Challenging Stereotypes in Select South Asian Fiction

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## Abstract

This article embarks on a captivating exploration of the multifaceted portrayal of Muslim women in South Asian fiction, delving into Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* and Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study unravels the nuanced dimensions of female identity, societal challenges, and resilience embedded in these narratives. Navigating the intersectionality of Islam and feminism, inspired by Susan Carland's insights, the article confronts pervasive stereotypes, revealing diverse realities and challenging preconceptions. Tracing the historical context of women in South Asian fiction, the analysis concludes by urging a continued celebration and exploration of the rich narratives shaping contemporary Muslim womanhood. Shahraz and Hashimi emerge not only as storytellers but as architects dismantling stereotypes, leaving an indelible mark on the captivating realm of South Asian literature.

**Keywords:** South Asian fiction, Muslim women, feminism and female identity, Islam, stereotypes, intersectionality, diversity

Qaisra Shahraz is a British-Pakistani novelist and scriptwriter known for her impactful contributions to contemporary English fiction. Born in Pakistan, Shahraz later settled in the UK. Her works, including *The Holy Woman*, explore themes of identity, gender, and societal expectations, particularly focusing on the experiences of Muslim women. Nadia Hashimi is an Afghan-American paediatrician and author renowned for her insightful storytelling. Born in the United States to Afghan parents, Hashimi's novels, such as *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*,

illuminate the struggles of Afghan women across generations, providing a nuanced perspective on their resilience in the face of societal challenges and geopolitical turmoil.

South Asian fiction serves as a captivating lens through which the evolving roles, struggles, and resilience of Muslim women are intricately woven into the fabric of societal narratives. This article embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of female identity, delving into the complexities artfully presented by acclaimed authors such as Qaisra Shahraz and Nadia Hashimi. The narratives examined within this literary tapestry not only provide insight into the lives of the protagonists but also offer a profound reflection on the broader societal contexts that shape and challenge the experiences of Muslim women.

The spotlight falls first on the works of Qaisra Shahraz, whose novel *The Holy Woman* introduces readers to Zarri Bano, a character that transcends the conventional boundaries imposed upon Muslim women. Shahraz's storytelling illuminates the intricacies of Zarri Bano's journey, a narrative that challenges stereotypes, questions traditions, and symbolizes the resilience of modern Muslim womanhood. As we navigate the pages of Shahraz's creation, we will dissect the layers of complexity within Zarri Bano's character, unveiling her as a powerful emblem of defiance against societal expectations.

In tandem with Shahraz's exploration, we delve into Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, where the narratives of Rahima and her great-great-grandmother, Shekiba, unfold against the backdrop of Afghanistan. This dual narrative, separated by a century, offers a poignant portrayal of the unyielding struggles faced by Afghan women. Rahima's contemporary story becomes a mirror reflecting the enduring hardships and constrained agency experienced by women in a society marked by geopolitical turmoil. As we journey through the lives of these characters, we will unravel the timeless threads that bind the experiences of Muslim women across generations.

Furthermore, this article delves into the pervasive stereotypes associated with Muslim women in South Asia, challenging preconceived notions and shedding light on the diverse realities that exist within this demographic. Drawing from the insights of Susan Carland, we navigate the intersectionality of Islam and feminism, exploring the dichotomy faced by Muslim women who are pressured to choose between faith and human rights. Carland's perspective becomes a guiding beacon as we navigate the intricate interplay of identity, faith, and activism within the narratives we explore.

Fast-forward to the contemporary era, and the battle against stereotypes persists. In the realm of Muslim women in South Asia, stereotypes have woven themselves into the very fabric of societal perceptions. This article unearths these stereotypes, dissecting both the positive and negative notions that have transformed into prejudices, shaping behaviours, and perpetuating discrimination. The pervasive nature of preconceived notions about Muslim women is unveiled, laying bare the impact of stereotypes on their lived experiences. It addresses the misrepresentation of Muslim women as inherently coerced, emphasizing the need to recognize the diversity of experiences and identities within this demographic. By confronting these stereotypes, the article seeks to dismantle the distorted lens through which Muslim women are often viewed, fostering a more nuanced and accurate understanding.

As we embark on this literary exploration, the aim is to unravel the rich tapestry of contemporary South Asian fiction, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the complexities and diversities that define the female Muslim experience. From the defiance of characters like Zarri Bano to the resilience of Rahima, these narratives become windows into a world where women navigate tradition, modernity, and the ever-evolving landscape of their own identities.

Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* introduces us to the captivating character of Zarri Bano, a woman who becomes a symbol of resistance against the constricting shackles of traditional norms. As we delve into Shahraz's narrative, we witness Zarri Bano's journey as a formidable force, challenging preconceived notions about Muslim women. Shahraz, a prominent figure in modern English fiction, intricately crafts Zarri Bano's character to question societal expectations and defy the limitations imposed on women in conservative settings.

The richness of Zarri Bano's character is evident in her assertion, "I am a free woman, I will decide if I want this or any other man. This is why ten years have elapsed and I still have not married" (Shahraz 16). Shahraz skilfully paints a portrait of a woman who transcends the dichotomy often imposed on Muslim women, portraying Zarri Bano as a modern, educated, and independent individual who courageously challenges the status quo. This defiance against societal norms becomes a powerful theme, unravelling the complexities surrounding female identity in the context of contemporary South Asian fiction.

Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* expands our exploration by weaving together dual narratives that shed light on the intricacies of Afghan women's identities. Hashimi's work is a poignant portrayal that spans generations, connecting the stories of Rahima

and her great-great-grandmother, Shekiba. Rahima, the contemporary protagonist, becomes a conduit through which the multifaceted nature of Afghan women's experiences is explored. Hashimi delicately peels back the layers of Rahima's character, illustrating her struggles in a society marked by gender inequality, societal expectations, and the enduring impact of geopolitical turmoil.

The use of dual narratives, separated by a century, adds a profound dimension to the exploration of female identity in Hashimi's work. The parallel stories of Rahima and Shekiba highlight the enduring challenges faced by Afghan women, emphasizing the persistence of constrained agency across generations. Through Rahima's story, Hashimi paints a poignant picture of the resilience of Afghan women who, despite adversities, carve out spaces of agency and strength.

In this exploration, references to the main document serve as pillars, supporting the analysis of these literary works. Shahraz and Hashimi, through their artistry, contribute to reshaping the narrative landscape surrounding Muslim women, challenging stereotypes and providing a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences that define contemporary Muslim womanhood.

The exploration of women in South Asian fiction embarks on a journey through the annals of literature, tracing the evolution of portrayals from early pioneers to contemporary perspectives. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of female authors, predominantly from the elite class, shaping narratives that became pivotal in the discourse surrounding women's roles. Themes of domesticity, ethics, and the imperative of female education emerged as keystones in their literary endeavours, reflecting a society in transition.

These pioneering narratives lay the foundation for an intricate interplay between tradition and modernity, a theme that continues to echo through contemporary works. The 'New Woman,' depicted as a cultural and literary figure, emerges as a symbol of evolving societal norms and aspirations. The early authors subtly challenged prevailing norms through their exploration of domestic life and ethical dilemmas, advocating for the education and empowerment of women.

As the narrative thread extends to contemporary South Asian fiction, particularly works centered around Muslim women, the struggle against stereotypes takes center stage. The pervasive nature of preconceived notions about Muslim women in South Asia unfolds through an examination of both positive and negative stereotypes. These stereotypes, whether depicting

Muslim women as exoticized and submissive or as oppressed and coerced, have transformed into deep-rooted prejudices. This transformation significantly influences behaviour, perpetuating discrimination and hindering a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and identities within this demographic. In weaving together these diverse strands of narrative, from the early pioneers to contemporary authors and insightful commentators, we unravel the resilience of women in South Asian fiction. The evolving voice of women, particularly those of Muslim identity, reverberates through these pages, challenging stereotypes, navigating dual identities, and paving the way for a more inclusive and enlightened future.

The 20th century witnessed a rapid surge in women's movements, challenging the pervasive impact of patriarchy in Pakistan across various aspects of daily life, from education to job opportunities, legal protections, marriage systems, and human rights. Among the prominent figures of this era was Benazir Bhutto, a vocal women's rights activist who later became the Prime Minister in the 20th century, pioneering women's involvement in politics (Korson and Maskiell 600-601).

Amid the predominant portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed by their religion and cultural practices, Qaisra Shahraz takes a different approach in her novel, *The Holy Woman*. The narrative unfolds the life of Zarri Bano, a woman who seemingly enjoys the best of both worlds but finds herself at odds with rural customs and traditions. Zarri Bano, with her "green eyes, curly hair, and dimpled cheeks," professes a unique form of feminism, albeit with "conditions applied." Trained to evolve into an independent woman with feminist consciousness intertwined with religious ideology, her life takes an unforeseen turn following the death of her only brother.

Zarri Bano, the novel's protagonist, becomes a canvas of complexities, contradicting and merging layers within herself. In a society where daughters of feudal chiefs are often confined, Zarri Bano stands out as university-educated, financially independent, and well-traveled. She adeptly employs the benefits of her education to uplift disadvantaged members of her sex. When faced with a marriage proposal from Sikander, a Karachi gentleman, Zarri Bano vehemently rejects the notion of being ensnared like a fish, asserting her agency and autonomy.

Zarri Bano's persona reveals layers of complexity, portraying her as a ferocious woman, confronting contradictions and ultimately finding tranquility. Despite her education, financial independence, and freedom of movement, her father, a feudal figure, seeks to preserve his land

and name through an old tradition—forcing Zarri Bano into a marriage with the Qur'an. This act is intended to ensure the continuation of the family legacy.

The depth of Zarri Bano's character is further accentuated by her interactions with her sister, Ruby, and the unexpected twists in her life. Kidwai (12) observes Qaisra Shahraz's intent to portray a strong woman challenging stereotypical roles, and Zarri Bano embodies this newly emerging Muslim woman. Empowerment is not confined to Zarri Bano alone; it resonates across other female characters, each exhibiting defiance and challenge. The mother, Shahzada, intervenes to rescue her daughter, confronting her husband's puppeteering and the male-dominated traditions that dictate her daughter's fate. This dynamic between mother and daughter becomes a powerful symbol of resistance, both verbal and physical, against male protectors and societal norms.

Firdaus, labeled as the washerwoman's daughter, shares the assertive traits of Zarri Bano. Educated and proud beyond her societal status, Firdaus challenges norms, illustrating that education transcends social hierarchies. Despite being the daughter of a washerwoman, Firdaus's position in the institution is a testament to the transformative power of education.

What sets *The Holy Woman* apart, according to Kidwai, is the transformation within patriarchal heads who realize the misery inflicted upon their womenfolk. Zarri Bano, despite being forced into the role of a holy woman, emerges as a resilient and highly educated modern Muslim woman. Her authenticity, as seen through various critics' lenses, showcases strength of character and challenges preconceived notions.

In conclusion, *The Holy Woman* stands as a literary triumph that explores the evolving identity of Muslim women in the face of societal expectations and traditions. Zarri Bano's journey becomes a poignant narrative of empowerment, resilience, and the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, echoing the struggles and triumphs of contemporary Muslim women in South Asia.

The plight of women in Afghanistan during the years of Taliban rule is often depicted in a narrative that portrays them as voiceless victims of war, violence, and repression, waiting to be liberated by Western intervention. However, this portrayal is not only incomplete but also inaccurate. While Afghan women did suffer, they were not passive victims; many actively resisted the oppressive regime. The focus of media attention and research on women's repression often overshadowed the narrative of Afghan women as active social participants.

Historically, Afghan women have been seen as victims of political turmoil and violence, but there is a growing acknowledgment of their active roles in society. Women's rights organizations, like the Revolutionary Afghan Women Association (RAWA) founded in Kabul in the 1970s, aimed to give a voice to oppressed women, encouraging resistance against oppression and advocating for peace, democracy, and women's rights. Despite the challenges, these women actively participated in Afghanistan and refugee camps in Pakistan during the Soviet war.

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Nadia Hashimi provides a nuanced perspective on Afghan women's lives through the intertwined stories of Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba, separated by a century. Rahima's narrative, set in contemporary times, reveals that despite the passage of time, Afghanistan's socio-cultural landscape remains resistant to change.

Rahima, the protagonist, hails from a small town near Kabul and faces a life marked by tragedy, abuse, and resilience. As the daughter of an opium-addicted soldier and Raisa, Rahima grows up with four sisters, but their education is abruptly halted by their father to avoid societal shame. In a society governed by fear and with no sons, Rahima's life takes a challenging turn. Encouraged by her aunt, she becomes a bacha posh, a role allowing her to assume the identity of a boy named "Rahim" for the family.

Rahima's journey as a bacha posh continues until puberty, and she experiences the complexities of developing female secondary sex characteristics while living as a boy. Forced into marriage with Abdul Khaliq, a man much older than her father, Rahima finds herself ill-prepared for the demands of wifhood. The narrative unfolds Rahima's struggle to reconcile her identity as a woman in a society that often denies agency to females.

Hashimi skillfully navigates the complexities of Afghan societal norms, portraying Rahima's internal conflicts and her yearning for freedom. Rahima's story becomes a modernized echo of her great-great-grandmother Shekiba's desire for autonomy. Both women grapple with societal expectations and limitations imposed on them simply because they are female.

The novel delves into the harsh realities faced by Rahima and Shekiba, highlighting their shared aspirations for freedom and the right to determine their destinies. Despite the narrative being set a century apart, the common thread of limited agency and societal

constraints binds the two women together. As Rahima reflects, "...men can do whatever they want with women," emphasizing the persistent gender disparities in Afghan society.

Rahima's journey becomes a poignant exploration of resilience and self-discovery. Cursed for being born a girl, Rahima undergoes a transformative realization of her worth, akin to a precious pearl. Her relentless spirit helps her navigate the challenges posed by her husband, providing a stark contrast to women who resign themselves to fate. Hashimi uses Rahima's story to shed light on the enduring struggle of Afghan women, challenging the notion of progress in gender equality.

Hashimi weaves a compelling narrative against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, encompassing the Soviet and American invasions and their profound impact on women's lives. The novel brings attention to the issue of gender subalternity, emphasizing the persistent subjugation of women to men. As Simone de Beauvoir aptly stated, "Man is the Subject and Absolute, but woman is the Other,"<sup>(31)</sup> capturing the essence of the gender dynamics prevalent in Afghan society. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* stands as a testament to the resilience of Afghan women across generations. Through Rahima and Shekiba, Hashimi offers a powerful narrative that transcends time, portraying the enduring struggles and aspirations of Afghan women striving for agency, freedom, and recognition in a society fraught with challenges.

In the vast tapestry of South Asian fiction, the portrayal of Muslim women emerges as a complex and nuanced exploration of identity, challenges, and resilience. This comprehensive analysis has journeyed through the works of two distinguished authors, Qaisra Shahraz and Nadia Hashimi, unravelling the threads that weave together the intricate stories of women defying stereotypes and societal expectations.

The multifaceted exploration extended to the pervasive stereotypes associated with Muslim women in South Asian literature. Drawing from the insights of Susan Carland, the analysis navigated the intersectionality of Islam and feminism, unraveling the dichotomy faced by Muslim women who are pressured to choose between faith and human rights. Carland's perspective became a guiding beacon, urging a recognition of the depth and diversity of Muslim women's experiences and identities.

In confronting stereotypes, the article unearthed both positive and negative notions, shedding light on the diverse realities within the demographic. The misrepresentation of Muslim women as inherently coerced was challenged, emphasizing the need to recognize the

rich tapestry of experiences and identities within this group. By dismantling distorted lenses through which Muslim women are often viewed, the article sought to foster a more nuanced and accurate understanding.

The exploration also delved into the historical context of women in South Asian fiction, tracing the evolution of portrayals from early pioneers to contemporary perspectives. The emergence of female authors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries set the stage for a nuanced interplay between tradition and modernity. Themes of domesticity, ethics, and the imperative of female education became keystones in the literary endeavors, reflecting a society in transition.

This comprehensive analysis offers a panoramic view of Muslim women in South Asian fiction. From the defiance of characters like Zarri Bano to the resilience of Rahima, these narratives serve as windows into a world where women navigate tradition, modernity, and the ever-evolving landscape of their own identities.

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