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A Spell to Empower Women: Religion, Culture and Domestic Violence in Pakistan

In this essay, Behzad analyzes themes of gender, violence and nationalism in Rukhsana Ahmad's short story, "The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon." The story is about a Pakistani woman, Nisa, who turns to black magic in an attempt to escape from an abusive relationship. Behzad traces the underlying commentary on women's empowerment in the context of religio-political nationalism in Pakistan as it relates to gender roles and violence against women. An earlier version of this essay was produced for the course, South Asian Literature and Culture (HND 2700) at York University and was awarded the 2017 York Centre for Asian Research Undergraduate Essay Prize.

In Pakistan, the nation built on a claim for a separate state for Indian Muslims, the correlation between religion and politics has persistently governed the lives of its population. The strategic use of religion by state actors, the military establishment and civil society established and legitimized the hegemony of men. The lives of women in politico-religious discourse continue to be defined in terms of their roles as daughters, wives and mothers who exist to reproduce and maintain the future of the nation. Filomena M. Critelli (2012) defines Pakistan as an example of a “classic patriarchy” where women are controlled through institutionalized seclusion, restricted behaviour and activities, rigid gender roles, and the linking of family honour to female virtue (440). Though no nation has been able to successfully eradicate violence against women, Pakistani women are particularly vulnerable due to the legitimization of a patriarchal culture through religion. “The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon,” by the Pakistani writer Rukhsana Ahmad (2004), sheds light on the vulnerability and repression of Pakistani women through a story about a woman in an abusive relationship.

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Why do women in a Muslim majority nation that successfully elected the first female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, continue to suffer patriarchal violence? This paper seeks to critically analyze “The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon” to argue that the use of religion to build nationhood in Pakistan has made women more vulnerable to violence. For this purpose, this paper revolves around three key themes: The first section of the paper looks at the use of Islam by state and non-state actors as a tool to promote a gender-based politico-religious agenda and the effect of this use of Islam on women’s lives. The second section discusses social and cultural factors that continue to disempower women through beliefs and attitudes about the role of women. Finally, I examine how women can help empower each other to eventually break the vicious cycle of women’s oppression.

Nisa, the main protagonist of “The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon,” is a victim of domestic violence who resorts to black magic to resolve her marital woes. Talat, the practitioner of black magic, suggests to Nisa that giving a drop of menstrual blood to her husband to drink would cast a powerful spell from which he would be unable to overcome. As disgusted as Nisa is by this suggestion,

she is unable to elude the thought of Talat and her words. Nisa is trapped between religiously and culturally prescribed roles for women, and wanting to free herself from the constant abuse that she suffers at the hands of her husband. Though she is unwilling to perform the spell, she is ultimately empowered to take back control of her life and eventually leaves her abusive husband. Set in Lahore, Ahmad's story gives important insights into the idea of an 'Islamic Pakistan'. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, envisioned a secular state, as demonstrated in his 1947 address to the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, where he stated:

You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed, that has nothing to do with the business of the State. (in Mukherjee 2007, 180)

However, the death of Jinnah within a year of the creation of Pakistan left an opening for politico-religious parties to elide 'the creation of a state for Muslims' in favour of the creation of an 'Islamic state' (Shaheed 2010, 852). This resulted in the promotion of a politico-religious agenda where Islam became a tool to build Muslim nationhood in Pakistan. Aggressive state measures worked to construct the idea of 'good Muslims' as synonymous with being 'good Pakistanis' (858).

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Gender became central to the state's politico-religious agenda with the promotion of the notion of an 'Islamic woman' who is self-sacrificing and domesticated (Shaheed 2010, 858). With such notions in place, women's social reality came to be governed not only by the state, but also by individual actors, mostly their own family members, who became propagators of the state's agenda. Women's rights in Pakistan were severely affected during the era of Prime Minister Zia-ul-Haq, whose 'Islamization' policies negated any opportunity for women to gain equal rights (852). Restrictive gender rules, Islamic dress codes such as the burqa and the veil, and the public/private divide was vigorously enforced during his regime. In this context, the failure of women to ascribe to their prescribed role can be dangerous. Ahmad (2004) shows this

societal pressure in her story through the level of Nisa's fear and guilt in seeking solutions through black magic. By stepping outside of her prescribed role and entering the prohibited space of black magic, Nisa endangers her reputation as a good Muslim woman (205). Ahmad also takes up the notion of Islamic dress code as Nisa borrows her friend's burqa when she visits Talat, the black magic practitioner (205). Contrary to the use of the burqa as a tool by the state to disempower women and dominant perceptions of the burqa as an oppressive article of clothing, the burqa creates a safe space for Nisa that allows her to crossover from the private domain of the female to the public domain of the male. It allows her to step outside of her house and into a space prohibited for 'good women'.

A male dominated society's regulation of women's clothing in accordance with Islam is often associated with the idea of protecting women. Ahmad disrupts this idea through the depiction of two men sitting outside Talat's house who look at women passing by, shout obscenities at them and hum songs to draw their attention, despite the women being covered with shawls, *dupattas* or burqas (206). These interactions counter the notion that if women want to protect themselves they must cover up, and that those who are verbally or sexually abused are vulnerable because of their clothing. These women, however, would just ignore this behaviour, as most women are taught to, using the dominant narrative of 'boys will be boys'.

While the state uses religion to confine women in the private sphere, men in their roles as fathers, brothers and husbands use Islam within the private sphere to disempower women. For example, this is visible through men's claims over women's bodies and their belief in the right to punish their wives if they refuse sex. When Nisa's husband, Hameed, asserted his conjugal rights, Nisa never denied him because she believed "it was her part of the deal, her return for the housekeeping allowance" (Ahmad 2004, 212). Moreover, she had been taught that refusing husbands was the way of "wayward women" (214). Another aspect of Zia's 'Islamization' was blaming women who were publicly visible for the disintegration of family, moral rectitude and values as well as for corruption and other social ills (Shaheed 2010, 859). One such

woman, found in Ahmad's story, is Talat, a practitioner of black magic, who represents evil women who are seen as corrupting other women and whose power represents a danger to men's dominance.

The agenda propagated through Zia's 'Islamization' policies continues to be enforced long after the end of his regime that lasted from 1978 to 1988 through the social and cultural practices it put in place that make women more vulnerable to domestic violence. Pakistani society teaches women to compromise, work on their relationship, and tolerate and hide their pain, rather than empowering them to get out of abusive relationships. Women, particularly mothers, often participate in the subjugation of other women, which leads to victims of domestic violence suffering in silence. Mothers bring up their daughters teaching them of the subordinate role of women, and when such teachings are passed down from one generation to the next, women remain stuck in the vicious cycle of oppression. Such teachings are apparent in the words of Nisa's mother when she tells her that "a good woman knows how to keep the family's secret. You can survive without letting the world know" (Ahmad 2004, 211). Hence, every time someone from her hometown would come to visit her, Nisa kept up her appearance so they wouldn't know about the abuse that she was suffering (211). Nisa also saw other women being taught the same lessons, such as her friend Seema's experience with her aunt who lectured Seema at her wedding on how to cope with her new life, teaching her forgiveness and forbearance (215). Moreover, with such teachings in place, women's abuse and oppression is often seen as their own fault. When Nisa is questioned by her neighbour's mother about what makes Hameed so angry, there is an underlying assumption that the woman must be doing something that makes her husband angry and she should work to resolve the tension she is causing (214).

Women in Pakistan live in a society with structural inequality and the lack of resources invested by the state and the family in the development of women adds to their vulnerability to violence and forces them to remain in abusive relationships (Critelli 2012, 440). Women often suffer in silence due to their lack of education and awareness of their legal rights, financial dependence on their

spouses and, too often, because they are mothers and think that they have no option but to stay in abusive relationships for the sake of their children. Nisa too is financially dependent on her husband and has three children with him, which contributes to her reluctance to leave him. As captivating as Nisa's journey to finally walk out of her abusive relationship is, Ahmad leaves the story open ended. The reader is informed that Nisa left Hameed and decided to go to her mother's house, but it is left to the reader to decide whether she was accepted or turned away by her mother. So, while one may assume that Nisa was now free, the stories of many women in Pakistan indicate otherwise. Parents often send their daughters back to their marital home due to concerns about family honour and the supposed shame that the divorce of a daughter would bring (Critelli 2012, 447). Associating family honour with female virtue has often been one of the major reasons for violence against women and results in the deaths of around 5,000 women each year (Thomson 2016).

In a society where the state fails to protect women and instead contributes to their subjugation, Ahmad's story shows how women can support and help to foster safer environments for each other.

In a society where the state fails to protect women and instead contributes to their subjugation, Ahmad's story shows how women can support and help to foster safer environments for each other. For Nisa, confiding in her neighbours who knew of the ongoing violence at her home had made things easier for her (Ahmad 2004, 212). Her neighbour, Zarina, proved to be a great support as she would call to ask if Nisa was alright and it was her bonding with Zarina that encouraged her to seek help from Talat (211). "The Spell and the Ever-Changing Moon" leaves the reader with an enduring lesson on how women can help empower each other. In a society where women like Talat are seen as outcasts, Talat uses women's needs to make money for herself. Despite being seen as a fraud by many, Talat empowers herself to survive in a world where there are so few opportunities for women and where she is perceived as evil and dangerous. She is not only a fearless businesswoman who possesses power and agency, Talat also helps other women and gives those who seek her help some hope after all else has failed. For Nisa, Talat is a friend and sympathizer with whom women can share their pain (214). Nisa saw Talat as possessing power that she longs to have and wants to be as brave as Talat. It was Talat who first told her that "women are powerful beings" (210). It was her encounter with Talat that

empowers Nisa and makes her realize that women can possess power. As a result of this encounter, Nisa's attitude towards her own body changes: she starts to resent her husband and goes from wanting to change her husband to hoping for a better life for herself without him. Even though she is unable to perform the spell, it is her desire to be like Talat that eventually enables Nisa to leave her husband.

In conclusion, the use of Islam by both state and non-state actors to promote a gendered politico-religious agenda has left Pakistani women vulnerable to violence. Moreover, the beliefs and teachings enforced by society and culture add to the vulnerability of women. However, as Ahmad's story shows, women can empower each other and help other women like Nisa to no longer be victims of domestic violence. But with the continuing violence against women in Pakistan, there is an urgent need for its government to implement laws for the protection of women from all forms of violence. However, the government must also ensure that these laws are enforced, unlike the current laws against marital rape that have failed to lead to any prosecutions, let alone convictions. Most importantly, a change in the societal attitude towards women, their role in society, and building safer environments for all women is a must. There is a need to understand what makes certain women more vulnerable to violence, such as lack of education or poverty, and these issues must be actively addressed. Without the implementation of these much-needed measures by the state and a change in socio-cultural practices, vulnerable Pakistani women will be left with no hope but to long for a spell that may protect them and give them equality in a patriarchal society.

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Born and raised in Pakistan, Wardah Behzad is trying her best to embrace the cold weather and snow since moving to Canada. She graduated Summa Cum Laude in Political Science from York University and has a keen interest in South Asian religions, culture and politics. A political junkie and history buff, you can find her watching cricket and enjoying good food when not arguing about Pakistani politics or writing research papers.

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