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Female Angst and Cultural Confinement: An Existential Reading of The Holy Woman

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research explores the existential themes of Angst and authenticity in Qaisra Shahraz's novel The Holy Woman, focusing on the psychological and philosophical struggles of the protagonist, Zarri Bano. Grounded in the theories of existentialist philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, the study examines how Zarri Bano's experiences of societal expectation, denial of womanhood, and internalized oppression reflect a broader existential crisis. The analysis draws on concepts such as Nietzsche's "slave morality," Sartre's "bad faith," and Camus' notion of absurdity to frame Zarri Bano's journey through patriarchal and religious constraints. By employing textual analysis, the research highlights how Zarri Bano's forced transformation into a "Holy Woman" becomes a symbol of existential Angst, reflecting the suppression of individual desire and autonomy in the name of tradition and morality. The paper further examines how gendered subjugation is perpetuated by patriarchal misinterpretations of religion and cultural norms. Through dialogue and introspection, Zarri Bano displays moments of resistance, revealing her evolving self-awareness and search for authenticity. This research argues that existential Angst can serve as a catalyst for self-realization and personal freedom. Drawing parallels with characters such as Roquentin from Sartre's Nausea, the study concludes that existential suffering, while deeply disorienting, can foster resilience, creativity, and transformation. The paper calls for a reevaluation of cultural paradigms that hinder women's autonomy and encourages embracing existential inquiry as a path to self-definition and liberation in oppressive contexts.
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INTRODUCTION

Existentialism has affected many literary works throughout history. To study existentialism in literature, focus should be on existential themes and methodologies. These themes include sense of being and becoming, Angst, personal freedom, Self-awareness, isolation, moral responsibility, free will, and Authenticity.

Due to its connection to the philosophical tradition, Existentialism appears in writings before its formal emergence, notably in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard, a 19th-century Danish philosopher, is recognized as the founder of existentialism, influencing later thinkers with his concepts like the "Leap of Faith" and emphasis on personal choice and faith. Nietzsche contributed by challenging morality and religion, introducing the "Will to Power," and rejecting absolute truths, laying groundwork for existentialist thought.

Existentialism formally emerged in early to mid-20th century Europe, with Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger as key proponents. Sartre, particularly in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), emphasized themes such as "Existence precedes Essence," radical freedom, and "Bad Faith," central to existentialist thought.

Existentialism rejects objective structures of meaning. Meaning is derived only through subjective acts. Though this appears to weaken ethics, existentialists argue it is necessary to challenge religious and universal truths. Those who fail to choose their path live inauthentically. Most people live this way, while the existential hero embraces the meaninglessness of existence and lives freely in the wake of the "Death of God" and collapse of fixed meanings.

One of the most significant aspects of existential philosophy is the concept of Existential Angst. Sartre (1943, 1956), in *Being and Nothingness*, links Angst to freedom and responsibility, emphasizing individual struggle, though criticized for neglecting sociocultural influences (Camus, 1951). Conversely, Kierkegaard (1849) associates Authenticity with self-conscious individuality but is also critiqued for being overly introspective (Heidegger, 1927). Authenticity involves confronting fear, recognizing freedom, and taking responsibility—though even sincere self-acceptance can be shaped by social pressure. While both Sartre and Kierkegaard contribute foundational insights, they overlook how sociocultural contexts affect selfhood. Foucault (1995) critiques this by highlighting how autonomy is limited by societal structures. Research, such as Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960), suggests anxiety can provoke introspection and promote authenticity, yet also cautions that it can lead to paralysis. As Kierkegaard (1844) famously wrote, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom," pointing to its dual capacity to inspire authentic action or

impede it. Ultimately, the relationship between Angst and Authenticity is complex—while Angst may encourage genuine selfhood, it can also bring overwhelming challenges.

Western philosophy has been profoundly influenced by Existentialism, a movement that emphasizes subjective experience and individual freedom. Its reception in the West includes both enthusiastic adoption and significant criticism. Beyond philosophy, Existentialism has also had a notable impact on various academic disciplines, including literature, art, psychology, psychotherapy, and theology, where its focus on personal autonomy and choice has found meaningful expression.

In Eastern civilizations, the reception of Existentialism has been more complex and varied. Although existentialist thought emerged in Europe, its influence gradually extended to the East, where it encountered significant cultural and philosophical challenges. Despite these obstacles, existentialist ideas have left a lasting impression on certain strands of Eastern philosophy. For example, post-World War II Japanese philosophers such as Hajime Tanabe and Kitaro Nishida demonstrated strong existentialist influences in their work (Heisig, 2001). Similarly, in India, thinkers like Ramchandra Gandhi and Daya Krishna engaged with existentialist concepts in meaningful ways (Gandhi, 1974).

The interplay between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions created diverse pathways for the reception of existentialist thought across different regions. While cultural and philosophical differences limited its widespread adoption, existentialism nonetheless achieved a modest yet significant foothold in Eastern thought. Further research is needed to explore the contemporary relevance and influence of existentialism among Eastern cultural and intellectual communities.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The human condition, as explored through existentialist philosophy, frequently centers on themes of anxiety, absurdity, alienation, and the pursuit of authentic selfhood. Despite being rooted in Western philosophical discourse, existentialism has found compelling resonance across diverse cultural and literary contexts. However, there remains a significant gap in scholarship addressing how existentialist constructs—particularly existential angst—are articulated within South Asian literary narratives. Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* (2001) offers a unique platform for such inquiry, presenting a protagonist, Zarri Bano, whose life is marked by intense internal conflict, personal loss, and the burdens of cultural expectation.

Existing critical discourse tends to examine *The Holy Woman* through feminist or postcolonial lenses, often overlooking its philosophical depth and existential dimensions. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the novel from an existentialist perspective, particularly focusing on the notion of existential angst. Zarri Bano's emotional and psychological struggles mirror key existentialist concerns articulated by philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Her journey of self-realization, moral paralysis, and eventual confrontation with absurdity raises important questions about the universality of existential angst, especially within culturally specific frameworks.

Through a close textual reading, this research aims to explore how Zarri Bano's existential experiences reflect broader human concerns and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of existentialism in non-Western contexts. By doing so, the study expands the interpretative scope of existentialist theory within literature and addresses its relevance in Eastern socio-cultural environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism has significantly influenced postmodern literature and art, often being portrayed as elusive, indefinable, or irretrievably lost. Trilling (1971) argues that modern artists struggle to create work that resonates with audiences or challenges societal norms, particularly overlooking authenticity across class structures and mass culture.

The search for identity, particularly for women, is a persistent existential theme. From birth, women are expected to embody traits such as patience, submissiveness, and sacrifice, with little space for individuality. This struggle is a universal, gendered quest for selfhood. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* articulates this internal ambiguity: "We know what we are, but not what we may be" (Shakespeare, 1903, p. 64), highlighting the uncertainty of identity within patriarchal societies.

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) represent different responses to existential crises. As Karyel (2019) notes, while both protagonists confront meaninglessness and alienation, their responses diverge: Clarissa Dalloway reflects on past regrets and societal expectations through stream-of-consciousness narration, whereas Meursault lives indifferently in the present, disengaged from emotional and social norms. Both characters arrive at a reconciled acceptance of death—Clarissa through symbolic identification with Septimus, and Meursault through his embrace of the absurdity of life.

Pound's modernist poem *In a Station of the Metro* (1913) encapsulates the alienation and

fragmentation of modern life, likening individuals to ghostly figures, mirroring the psychological distance felt by Clarissa and Meursault. These modernist and existential works portray the individual as estranged from society and self, seeking meaning in a seemingly indifferent world.

Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) further emphasizes existential angst through the protagonist, Joseph K., who is prosecuted without knowing his crime, symbolizing the arbitrary structures of authority and the existential struggle for self-understanding. Similarly, in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation and isolation illustrate the burden of societal expectations and the despair that stems from the failure to achieve authentic selfhood (Farahmandian, 2018).

Smith (2022) observes that authenticity, once a private concern, has gained prominence in public life, notably in modern politics, where perceived personal authenticity often outweighs sincerity or honesty. While authenticity has always been relevant to postmodern thought, its significance continues to evolve with cultural shifts.

Although existential philosophy originated in the West, its themes have significantly influenced non-Western literary traditions, particularly within Asian and African contexts. Scholars have increasingly recognized that existential concerns—such as authenticity, freedom, absurdity, and alienation—resonate deeply within non-Western socio-political realities, reflecting unique cultural and historical conditions.

In Japanese literature, for instance, Hassan (2013) explores how Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994) embodies Sartrean and Heideggerian existential struggles through a protagonist navigating personal and societal turmoil. Similarly, Kenzaburo Oe's *A Personal Matter* (1964) portrays a character grappling with internal conflict shaped by societal expectations and trauma, thus illustrating existential dissonance within a distinctly Japanese milieu.

African literary narratives also reveal pronounced existential themes. Okeke (2015) identifies existential tensions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where the protagonist confronts the disintegration of cultural identity under colonial pressure. Likewise, writers such as Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie embed individual agency within broader political struggles, including responses to contemporary events like the Lekki toll gate shootings, reflecting the interplay between existential freedom and sociopolitical constraints.

Chinese literature similarly grapples with existential motifs. Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* (1921) depicts alienation and absurdity amid rapid social transformation, while Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (1990) narrates a spiritual and existential journey through post-Maoist China,

probing selfhood, cultural memory, and identity in a rapidly changing world.

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990) further advances this tradition by framing existential concerns within an allegorical critique of authoritarianism. Barkha (2013) interprets the novel's central conflict—the power struggle between the autocratic Grand Master and the self-reliant boatmen—as emblematic of resistance to totalitarianism during India's Emergency era. According to Ahmed (2015), characters such as the Headwoman, Patanjali, the Professor, and the Grandfather embody existential authenticity through their resistance and moral integrity, personifying Sartrean selfhood and Heideggerian confrontation with Angst. Joshi's narrative thus expands existential themes from individual alienation to collective moral resistance, critiquing materialism and state control while upholding authenticity, autonomy, and sacrifice.

Building upon this rich tradition of existential discourse in non-Western literatures, several scholars have examined the multifaceted themes in *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz. Haleem (2014) investigates gender stereotyping in the novel, noting that both male and female characters initially engage in gender-biased behaviors, which are later contested. This contestation fosters significant character transformations: Zarri and Shahzada evolve from submissive roles into empowered, authoritative individuals, while male characters like Sikander and Musa display emotional openness. Independent women such as Fatima and Naimat Bibi further exemplify the disruption of traditional gender norms, illustrating shifting societal attitudes toward gender roles.

Afkarina (2023) complements this perspective by analyzing the psychological dimensions of feminism in *The Holy Woman* through Freudian constructs—the id, ego, and superego—within the framework of Kate Millet's radical feminism. This study highlights Zarri Bano's transformation from an intelligent but arrogant woman into one who embraces her destiny as the titular holy woman, underscoring her evolving sense of agency and identity.

Similarly, Zubaidah (2020) applies Kurt Lewin's psychological theory to explore Zarri Bano's internal conflicts. Utilizing Lewin's conflict typologies—avoidance-avoidance, approach-avoidance, and double avoidance—the study reveals how Zarri navigates dilemmas related to love, duty, and identity by employing coping strategies such as avoidance and prioritizing the feelings of others.

Feminist critiques are further elaborated by Hassan (2013), who portrays Zarri as a figure of resistance against patriarchal norms, while Khan (2015) foregrounds the novel's existentialist

dimensions, interpreting Zarri's journey as one of self-discovery and authentic freedom. Ahmed (2017) adds to this discourse by discussing cultural identity, emphasizing how Zarri's negotiation of dual cultural affiliations mirrors broader struggles of belonging and selfhood within a Pakistani context.

Despite the breadth of these insightful studies, important gaps remain. Notably, few investigations fully explore the interconnections between core existential concepts such as angst, bad faith, and authenticity (Solomon, 1972; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Moreover, much of the existing literature relies on Western theoretical paradigms, often overlooking how these existential themes manifest within non-Western cultural experiences, particularly in relation to authenticity and selfhood (Sartre, 1943; Hassan, 2013).

Thus, although *The Holy Woman* has been examined from psychological, feminist, and existential viewpoints, no comprehensive existentialist framework integrating themes of freedom, choice, and authenticity has yet been applied. Such an approach promises to yield deeper insights into Zarri Bano's complex self-perception and the novel's broader exploration of the human condition.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, employing Allan McKee's (2003) textual analysis approach to investigate the existentialist dimensions in *The Holy Woman* (Shahraz, 2001). McKee's method is particularly effective for analyzing literary texts, as it facilitates a comprehensive examination of how meaning is constructed through language, imagery, and cultural representations. The analysis centers on the protagonist, Zarri Bano, focusing on her existential struggle as she navigates themes such as arbitrariness, ambiguity, and self-determination within a patriarchal and religious context.

McKee's framework emphasizes interpreting texts by analyzing their content in conjunction with the broader social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. This study specifically explores how existentialist philosophies—drawing on key thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Søren Kierkegaard—influence Zarri Bano's narrative of resistance and self-formation. The textual analysis identifies recurring motifs of freedom, agency, and the absurd, while also assessing how these concepts intersect with the societal and cultural structures portrayed in the novel.

Through close attention to linguistic choices, symbolic representations, and character development, the analysis seeks to uncover how Zarri Bano's existential journey is articulated

within the framework of existentialist discourse. By applying McKee's textual analysis method, the study aims to reveal the philosophical foundations embedded in the narrative, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between existentialism and feminist critique in contemporary South Asian literature.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF ANGST

The psychological concept Angst which Kierkegaard introduced stands as a seminal pre-Freudian work of psychology. According to Kierkegaard (1989) Angst emerged because human beings experience simultaneous present-day existence together with future-oriented thinking. Such inner tension produces psychological discomfort when people need to bridge their present self with their potential future selves. Angst creates motivational possibilities through its ability to make people strive for their objectives while maximizing their existence. When we experience too many choices our emotions shift toward despair and stagnation through our inability to manage our options together with our doubting thoughts. According to Kierkegaard experiencing Angst generates positive value because it lets people both choose and accept responsibility for their choices and their consequences. Through Angst we are able to remember the freedom of choice which requires us to plan our decisions with great care and responsibility. From his perspective it presented an occasion to encounter personal fears and make decisions that could establish significance in our life. Acceptance of our freedom anxieties allows us to base our choices on complete understanding and thus build a meaningful future using our freedoms. (Eternalized, 2020)

According to Kierkegaard (2020) each person must independently wrestle with truth and morality to take charge of responsibility by making decisions on their own path. According to him individuals need to gain personal control over their existence while rejecting all external guidance for their decision-making process. As per Kierkegaard Angst serves as both the result of sinful actions and the path to find spiritual salvation. Experiencing the feeling of Angst leads people to discover their deepest emotions and thoughts so they can develop Self-knowledge and reach spiritual growth. Through experiencing Angst individuals discover a tool to take actions which guide them toward salvation instead of staying devoted to their sinful patterns. According to his writings in order to achieve salvation people must personally guide their moral and spiritual development.

SARTRE'S NOTION OF ANGST

Existential Angst, is described as the constant attitude of Angst that comes with human freedom, as a crucial component. This fear is linked to the suffering of an Authenticity crisis; a crisis of being and acting true to oneself. Sartre used Angst most frequently when analysing how a person responded to the essential disorder of the universe. The conflict between the disorder of the universe and one's own aspirations, in Sartre's view, arises from the fact that people are only subject to personal constraints (Warnock and Sartre, 2003; Crowell, 2012). Similar to Heidegger, Sartre connected Angst to taking ownership of one's obligations. According to Heidegger and Sartre, Angst is a root cause of unfavorable feelings like Angst and sadness. However, Heidegger and Sartre had different views on what constitutes reason. In a universe that is mostly unstructured, Sartre acknowledged that there may not even be such a thing as reason and that instead, only man-made subjective explanations of behavior are possible. (Hirsh, 2010; Corr and Fajkowska, 2011)

Angst, according to Kierkegaard, is a means of saving mankind as well. Angst teaches us about our choices, our self-awareness, and our personal responsibility by transforming us from a state of unselfconscious immediacy to one of self-conscious reflection. (Kierkegaard, 1991) .Sartre speaks about reflective awareness and pre-reflective consciousness. Angst experiences help people reach their full potential. So, Angst may be a sign of sin, but it can also signal the realizing who you really are and liberation. Alternately, sin exists in the precise way that good and wrong resolve concern; for this reason, accepting Angst is the opposite of passing judgment. (Sartre, 1943)

ALBERT CAMUS VIEWS ON ANGST AND AUTHENTICITY

Camus tells fictional stories that tell about the despair and Angst of the individual such as *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *and The Fall* (1956). As does Kafka: *The Metamorphosis* (1915), *The Trial* (1925), *Nausea* (1938). Sartre philosophizes that all of these stories describe the Angst of a person trying to explore meaning in an illogical universe or the breakdown of meaning and the subsequent loss of a meaningful world. Almost all of them are stories about individuals who must face the outside world and accept responsibility for their own acts. They are frequently nervous and dejected because they are powerless in the face of challenges and forces that they neither comprehend nor have any control over. Camus said that in order to be a true Existentialist, one had to isolate themselves from society as much as they could .Since adhering to social norms is awful because it inhibits one from growing and making independent judgments. (Camus, 1955)

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The details of tradition, custom, and emotion that define modern-day Pakistan are intricately woven throughout Shahraz's (2001) novel *The Holy Woman*. It appears that her characters struggle with problems that are primarily mundane and ordinary. However, towards the end, they encounter situations that evoke queer narratives. Shahraz chooses rural locations where people live hard but traditional and modest lives. As a result, there is the issue of tribal tradition, which is not new to Muslim rural culture and hampers development.

Having such an obsession with tradition presents women in rural Pakistan with unique difficulties. This clarifies the various complexity of Shahraz's characters' lives, which spark readers' interest. One of her favorite subjects is the anguish and suffering endured by people due to a distorted destiny. Her lead character in *The Holy Woman* (2001), Zarri Bano, exemplifies this. Shahraz focuses on her home nation when writing.

There is no denying that Shahraz's literature features remarkable representations of women. The fate of Zarri Bano, who was linked to Shahzadi Ibadat, has been simplified to such an extent that it seems to be the tale of every rural feudal daughter in Pakistan.

One could argue that existential crisis is inevitably brought on by The Holy Woman's (2001) central plot, which centers on Zarri Bano's marriage with the Quran. There is a crucial resonance of violence in Shahraz's reporting on the cultural realities of rural Pakistan. Women's futures are put in danger by males like Habib Khan and Siraj Din. In a critical sense, this affirms women's powerlessness and subordination. The protagonist of The Holy Woman (2001), Zarri Bano, is positioned in the middle of a scenario where the full extent of power and authority assertion is used to highlight her character. Since religion is a discursive tradition that is constantly reenacted and ingrained in the power dynamics of society, it is undeniable that religious values influence cultural beliefs and behaviors and vice versa.

The issue, however, arises when traditional tribal customs are mistaken for religion (in this case, Islam) in order to appropriate power dynamics in favor of men. In the name of religion, these tribal or folk customs become ritualized and legitimized, which is the worst of the worst resulting in anxiety and despair in the lives of individuals. In rural Pakistan, patriarchal authority frequently perverts religious teachings to uphold male domination, as this novel illustrates. Although such a practice is not required by Islam, Habib Khan uses religious imagery to make his choice seem holy and untouchable. This is indicative of a larger social problem in which religious tales are selectively construed to subjugate women while giving males complete

power over their lives. Zari Bano's forced metamorphosis into a holy woman is a product of a strict societal structure that values male dominance and heredity rather than her faith.

EXISTENTIALIST ANGST IN ZARRI BANO

Angst, in the existentialist context, arises from the recognition of the vast possibilities and uncertainties inherent in human existence. Rather than viewing anxiety as a medical condition, existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre argue that it is an essential aspect of the human experience. Anxiety emerges when individuals confront the weight of their freedom and the responsibility to shape their lives.

Zarri, the Protagonist, in *The Holy Woman* (2001) is Habib Khan's eldest of three children, plus her education at Karachi's university has given her the confidence to make her own marital decisions, even though this also proves to be a lie later. Sikander, a young and suitable man who happens to fancy Zarri the moment he sees her, proposed marriage to Habib Khan. Zarri's elderly grandfather, Siraj Din (Habib Khan's father), finds her decision to visit and stay at Sikander's house in order to get to know him personally before deciding to get married to be nothing short of a shockwave. He tells Zarri's mother, Shahzada: "Are you telling me, Shahzada that my young unmarried granddaughter has gone to stay all alone on a strange family's home and is in the company of a single young man?" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 23). Shahraz shows the predicament of a young daughter in a family where a girl is unable to make her own decisions about marriage in front of her elders, particularly the men.

Following the loss of his only son Jafar, Habib Khan chooses to marry Zarri with the Quran. In accordance with the feudal custom of "Holy Woman," he does this (by marrying girls in accordance with the Quran) to withhold land and estate, which are seen essential for the socioeconomic survival and dignity of Pakistan's feudal class. This allows Zarri to serve as a substitute for Jafar because marrying the Quran entails lifelong celibacy. The tactic of Pakistani feudal families believes in withholding the inheritance through their male successors, thus Habib Khan consults Siraj Din before making the decision. This means that if there is no male heir, the entire estate passes with the girls after they get married (since Islam grants women property rights).

Zarri Bano is therefore designated to become a holy woman, or "shehzadi ibadat". Sadly, all of this is accomplished in the name of tradition, which unjustly works with patriarchy while hiding under religion. Zarri's marriage to the Quran is therefore seen as the only "culturally legitimate" method Habib could prevent his ancestral estate from vanishing. Here, Zarri addresses the first

stage of anxiety, in which people wrestle with the weight of their independence and their duty to direct their own lives.

ZARRI BANO AS A VICTIM OF EXISTENTIAL ANGST

Kierkegaard (1989) believed that Angst is a result of the fact that human beings are creatures who both lived in the moment and could think about the future. This paradox can lead to a deep sense of unease, as we are unable to reconcile our present nature with our future possibilities.

In this context, it is obvious that Zarri Bano understands what it takes to be a future holy woman. As a Muslim, she has the right to marry and to do so with her own will, but she fears a life of celibacy. By putting her down in a very uncomfortable way, Habib understands how to suppress her voice and limit her sexuality. However, Zarri Bano submits to her father's command because of their shared ideals. Habib demands this on his daughter since marriage is a counterbalance to "holiness". On the contrary, Zarri protests this in a modest way:

I want to live a normal life, as a normal woman, Father! I'd like to get married! As you know, I am not really religious. I am a modern, educated woman from the twentieth century. I am not a pawn in a male chess game. I am not living in the Mughal era. Father, don't you see that I have never regularly opened the Holy Quran or prayed in my life? Thus, how can I become a Holy Woman? I'm not best fitted for that position. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 62)

In this text, the speaker states her deep wish to live a free and normal life instead of being constrained by conventional norms. She denies that she should be compelled to play a religious role, stating that she lacks the spiritual commitment and devotion necessary for it. By portraying herself as a twentieth-century, educated, modern woman, she draws a distinction between her identity and the past oppression of women, who were frequently viewed as nothing more than tools in a patriarchal culture. Her statements demonstrate her desire for individual independence and self-determination and reveal a struggle against social standards that try to control her future. Her appeal ultimately aims to affirm her right to make her own decisions rather than merely avoiding a religious duty.

In the modern world that often feels chaotic and devoid of inherent meaning, many individuals grapple with existentialist Angst, a profound sense of unease forming from the realization of one's future and the absurdity of existence. This existential crisis manifests in various forms, from the search for purpose to the struggle against overwhelming despair. While it is argued in Existentialist philosophy that individuals can successfully navigate this Angst through personal growth and philosophical inquiry, others claim that it ultimately leads to inescapable despair and

nihilism. The complexity of how individuals confront existentialist Angst requires a nuanced exploration of both perspectives.

According to Kierkegaard (1943) in the process of experiencing Angst, the individual is faced with possibilities which may be both attractive and frightening. Amidst these possible choices an individual is forced to make choices. In the same context of making choices as discussed by Kierkegaard the mother of Zarri Bano in chapter six offers her a choice stating: "Your father wants you to become his heir, our 'Holy Woman,' (*Shahzadi Ibadat*), in the conventional sense.". (Shahraz, 2001 p. 62) Zarri Bano responding to her mother looks up and sees horror in her "warm brown eyes". Her eyes are like "wounded and hunted animal". She replies, "No mother! No" (Shahraz, 2001 p. 62).

The line "Her eyes are like "wounded and hunted animal" conjures up a potent picture of vulnerability, terror, and despair. In order to evoke a profound sense of anguish, powerlessness, and imprisonment, author Shahraz compares the character's eyes to those of a wounded and pursued animal. Like an animal being chased with no way out, the character in this simile appears to be in an emotional or psychological state where she feels surrounded, pursued, or helpless. The term 'wounded' indicates that she has been harmed before, whereas 'hunted' implies that she is still in danger or is receiving mistreatment. Her reply, "No mother! No," evokes despair, resistance, and possibly rebellion, thereby ramping up the tension in the scene. The repetition of 'No' enhances the urgency and emotional pain within her appeal, reaffirming that she is either rejecting a predetermined fate imposed on her or resisting something jarring, or simply that she is experiencing turmoil. The manner the character speaks with her mother may indicate a crisis emerging from a contradiction in expectation, resistance by family or tradition, or an internal crisis of self. Perhaps this line highlights conflict between tradition and the individual will, within a broader context of the themes Shahraz most often handles in women's struggles, social oppression, and family relationships. A moment of poignancy rooted in tension and psychological depth: that emotional intensity tells us very precisely that she is defying something important, whether it be a decision she disapproves of, a cultural dictation, or a familial imposition.

Here it can be clearly observed that the choices offered to Zarri Bano are frightening enough to make her cry from the depth of her soul. She is not even given the space or time to make a choice or to negotiate. Throughout the story it can be seen that she is constantly pressurized to accept the future planned by her dominating father. Her struggles and protests are not at all working. In chapter seven she utters her reaction within the walls of the room, "It cannot be!-They couldn't

do that to me!'…I must talk to my father and ask him to get rid of this bizarre idea from his mind". (Shahraz, 2001, p. 63)

NIETZCHE'S CONCEPT OF ANGST FACED BY ZARRI BANO

Nietzsche's contribution to existentialist themes through his critiques of traditional morality and religion; rejection of absolute truths and his exploration of the Will to Power laid the groundwork for existentialists' skepticism toward fixed values and their focus on individual agency. In the same context Zarri Bano anxiously decides to talk to her father "I must talk to him tonight!" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 63). She confronts her father by telling him that there is somebody she wants to marry, "Sikander is just ideal for her". (Shahraz, 2001, p. 66) and apologizes him for not accepting the choice she is offered because it will make her a 'puppet'. In response her father shrugged his shoulders and stubbornly answers back that it can't happen the way she thinks, he says, "It will happen, and it can! As a woman, do you believe you can stop it? Woman, the scales are stacked against you."(Shahraz, 2001, p.67). This remark implies that the outcome has already been determined and cannot be altered, reflecting a strong sense of power imbalance and inevitable consequence. Habib downplays the possibility that a woman could change the trajectory of events, focusing instead on the structural or societal forces that are against her. By making reference to the "scales" being weighted, the remark suggests an unjust system in which gender is a key factor in deciding influence and power. The tone reinforces the idea that opposition is pointless and is dismissive, even condescending. Eventually, this is a reflection of the larger fight against oppression and the difficulties women encounter in claiming their agency in a society that frequently undermines them. Nevertheless, Zarri Bano very darely rejects the notion of morality and truth, however, the clash of *Will to Power*, morality and religion is dominant here according to the notion of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's skepticism against fixed values and traditions is the central focus of Existential crisis at this stage in the story. At one point when Zarri Bano's mother is having conversation about the fixed values and traditions of their family; The protagonist's mother (Shahzada) with a breaking voice calls her husband and stops her husband to change his mind of sacrificing the life of their innocent girl. To her surprise the ominous silence of her husband is terrifying. He replies, "Don't waste your time discussing sacrifice. This is the fate that awaits my lovely Zarri Bano. Her destiny as a Shahzadi Ibadat was sealed by the passing of her brother. This has always been the case." (Shahraz, 2001, p.67). Zarri Bano's mother knows that her daughter's fate was indeed sealed. There was no escape for her daughter. Here, the questions

arises in case the brother of Zarri Bano had not died whether the father would have still shown agreement for Zarri to get marry to the man she likes?

The phrase 'There was no escape for her daughter' emphasizes Zarri Bano's forced destiny as a result of patriarchal customs and family expectations. This statement implies that she has no power over her own life and that circumstances outside of her control determine her fate. Whether her father would have approved of her marriage if her brother had not passed away is the main question, and it examines the intricate relationship between gender, obligation, and cultural norms in Qaisra Shahraz's story.

The death of her brother has a tremendous impact on Zarri Bano's situation, changing the balance of power and duty in the family. It is expected of the male heir to carry on the family's customs and legacy in many patriarchal countries. Zarri Bano finds herself thrust into a job that was never intended for her after her brother dies: that of the symbolic 'son' tasked with protecting the family's reputation and legacy. For the sake of tradition, her father thus forces her to become a *Holy Woman* (Shahraz, 2001) instead of letting her marry the guy she loves, sacrificing her happiness in the process.

If her brother hadn't passed away, the male heir would still have been in charge of passing on the family name, therefore Zarri Bano's father probably wouldn't have had any grounds to deny her wishes. This shows that her father's choice was motivated more by social and familial responsibilities that took precedence as circumstances changed than by a clear condemnation of love or personal preference. Thus, his 'agreement' or lack thereof is dependent on the strict systems of honor, obligation, and inheritance that establish gender roles in their culture.

This query brings to light the main tragedy of Zarri Bano's tale: her loss of independence due to deeply ingrained cultural traditions that put family responsibilities ahead of personal fulfillment, not because she was unloved or flawed. Important questions of fate, free will, and gender inequity are brought up by the way her fate becomes a representation of the sacrifices that women in patriarchal countries frequently have to make.

ZARRI BANO'S SLAVE MORALITY CAUSING ANGST

The definition of subordination is "something else is less important than the other thing" (Cobuild 2010, 1559). Hornby (2003) states that "subordination means having less power or authority than somebody else in a group or an organization," as defined by the Advanced Learners Dictionary. "Women's subordination" refers to the paternal dominance that most

civilizations subject women to, as well as their inferior status, lack of access to resources, and inability to make decisions, among other things. Therefore, women's subordination denotes their lower status in relation to men. Women's subordination is caused in part by discrimination, a sense of helplessness, and a lack of confidence and self-worth. Therefore, when men control women and there is a power dynamic, women are subordinated. Though feminists select diverse sites and causes of subordination, the subordination of women is a fundamental component of all interpersonal dominance hierarchies. The foundation of contemporary feminist philosophy is Simone de Beauvoir's contention that women are viewed as the second sex and thus inferior by males because they are essentially different from themselves (Beauvior, 1974). According to Kate Millet's theory of subordination, women are a passive sex group under patriarchal control (Millet, 1977).

By creating separate private and public spheres for men and women, respectively, patriarchal ideology has attempted to keep women out of power structures. Walby divides patriarchy into "two distinct forms: private and public patriarchy" in his theories (Walby 1990,p.24).

Central to Nietzsche's (1973) critique is the idea of "Slave Morality," which he contrasts with "Master Morality." Slave Morality, according to Nietzsche, is born out of a sense of resentment and inferiority, leading to a focus on others, compassion, and Self-denial. Master Morality, on the other hand, is characterized by a focus on oneSelf, strength, and the Will to Power. Culturally speaking, women's life in Pakistan are constantly impacted by concerns of immorality and slave morality, according to Aslam (2005). As a result, Pakistani women are afraid of their own sexuality. They take this action in an attempt to gain social acceptance, something they would not be able to achieve by acting differently. This is also clear in Zarri Bano's persona.

In response to her plea, Habib responds sharply, saying, "What are you trying to say is that you want a man in your life?" (Shahraz, 2001, p.62). He puts her under more pressure by entangling her in the same ancient customs and familial bonds that almost all Pakistani women are bound by.:

You can shout all you want, my dear, proud daughter, but I know you'll follow my instructions. We are really similar to each other. I know that neither you, nor our customs, will ever disappoint me. You should at least respect your grandfather if you are unable to follow my decision. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 63)

It is clear that Habib controls his daughter's body, mind, and spirit in a patriarchal and misogynistic manner. Evidently, here Zarri's father is behaving according to Nietzsche's concept of Master Morality, because of his authority as a feudal lord and his role as a father. He is successful in tying the idea of honor to his daughter's rejection and denial of her physical side. Habib's comment about wanting a man is what makes Zarri Bano give up. "Like other women, I became a coward and a victim rolled into one by sacrificing my own needs for the sake of our *Izzat* and our family's honor." (Shahraz, 2001, p. 73) By attacking her ego, he takes advantage of her feminine Self.

"Sacrificing my own needs" emphasizes the terrible truth that she has to repress personal desires, aspirations, or affection in order to preserve family honor. This emphasizes a major subject in Qaisra Shahraz's writing: the conflict between individual autonomy and social norms. In these situations, people are frequently required to sacrifice their hopes, love, or happiness in order to uphold the family's reputation, which serves to further reinforce the repressive influence of tradition.

This statement is evidence of the visible emotional and mental toll imposed on a human being for placing family honour above her own happiness. It is a scathing insight into the entire construct of honour culture and its oppressive gender roles. The duality of self-perception here becomes evident in that the human being feels caged by social conventions while she seems to acquiesce in her punishment. In the end, it questions agency, choice, and what is paid for upholding conventional ideals in the name of self-fulfillment.

Zarri Bano's character is the epitome of Slave Morality. She is raised to value obedience and modesty more than her own aspirations and goals. She wilfully sacrifices her marriage with Quran, her happiness, and everything else for the sake of her family tradition. Zarri Bano's driving force is the concern that she may anger people or, worse, draw their censure. She harbors no true desire for independence and Self-expression; we might say rather that she is actuated by the fear of rejection or of social ostracism from her community. For instance, Zarri Bano fully agrees with her father family's demand for her to wear a burqa, simply because of her feeling of being constricted in it (Shahab, 2001).

Slave Morality is primarily characterized by the suppression of desire. Based on this realization, she suppresses her own ambitions and wishes to abide by the societal norm. Her marriage, for example, has become a loveless, pragmatic union, due to which it is rather expected of her for the sake of stabilizing her family's finances than giving her any chance of fulfillment (Shahab, 2001).

Also, research shows how the suppression of desire can manifest negatively on anyone's mental and emotional health (Freud, 1915/1990). The character of Zarri Bano exemplifies this notion where she, by the suppression of her desires, enters a most desperate and suffocating existence. Another key idea behind Slave Morality is internalized oppression. This has been seen in her persona, having internalized her society's cruel values. She believes that it is her duty to serve and obey the men because she is less valuable than them (Shahab, 2001).

To conclude, Zarri Bano is a glaring example of Slave Morality. In the long line of concessions she made during her life, she had internalized them. Instead of an authentic desire for freedom and self-expression, her acts are animated by an elaborate will of pleasing others and keeping them happy. By criticizing the oppressive beliefs prevailing in Pakistani Society as enacted through the character of Zarri Bano, the narrative brings to light the poisonous consequences of internalized oppression and the suppression of desire on the psyche of its carriers. According to the novel, only by disavowing Slave Morality and leading a more true and independent existence can one actually be free and independent.

DENIAL OF WOMANHOOD CAUSING ANGST

Sartre (1943) demonstrates how reflective consciousness disproves the pre-reflective consciousness that it utilizes as its starting point. This leads to an instability in the Self that manifests in reflection: the Self is caught between reflexively grasping itself as a duality and being posed as a unity. Sartre (1943) adds another twist to this absence of Self-identity framing it as a work. Accordingly, the Self's quest for unity is a work for the Self-itself and is analogous to the Self's attempt to find its own basis.

Sartre's in his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) covers the idea of time in terms of 'temporarily'. Sartre says that it is never quite what it was and never quite what it will be since it is always changing. Even if, they have moved past this prior Self, when someone reflects on who they are. They invariably make this past self the subject of reflection. Because of this, they are no longer the same as they were in the past, according to Sartre.

This is the case in Shahraz's book, where sexism and misogyny, especially in rural Pakistan, is promoted under the cloak of religion and tradition. In keeping with the same background, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) book *Can the Subaltern Speak*?, elicits a huge reaction, which Spivak (1996) addresses in *The Spivak Reader*. Her essay's usage of the word "speak" has frequently been misinterpreted. Spivak argues that the word's use does not necessarily indicate that women are

silent. Spivak frequently draws attention to how their words fall short of conducting a "transaction" between the speaker and the listener.

The fact that Zarri Bano must repress her desires because she is a woman is among the most tragic parts of her journey. She loves Sikander and intends to wed him before her father's order. Her father's choice, however, denies her the freedom to decide her own destiny. She is expected to live a life of prayer and solitude, losing her individuality and becoming a symbol of family honor.

Usually, whenever women's desires and ambitions are treated casually, it is because patriarchal civilizations are set to impose other reasons on them, placed firmly in the cavity of the family and community. In this sense, an opposition and pain by Zarri Bano become trivial. Even if she pretends to have accepted her life, her soul is still a little rebellious, which very much denotes the pain of women when their freedom is snatched away. The book very well criticizes the cultural imposition whereby a woman is often forced to relinquish her ambitions of love, education, or career. The case of Zarri Bano is, in fact, representative of many women in the traditional world who have been deprived of the right to decide what to do with their bodies and destinies.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN JUSTIFYING ANGST

It also portrayed in the story that how religion is wielded in striking ways against the subjugation of women. Islam supports women's rights, such as the ability to marry and pursue education, yet powerful males frequently twist religious doctrine to suit their personal agendas. Habib Khan made the decision to designate his daughter as a holy woman out of a desire to keep control of his inheritance rather than out of true religious conviction. It is hard for Zarri Bano or anybody else to oppose him since he conceals his genuine intentions behind religious iconography. The way that religious teachings are selectively used to limit women's freedoms is a common pattern in many patriarchal countries. Whereas women are held to unattainable standards, males are free to follow their desires without fear of repercussion. *The Holy Woman* challenges the way that religious theory is frequently misunderstood to further patriarchal goals rather than promote justice by illuminating how Zari Bano's life is impacted by certain forms of faith.

ZARRI BANO A MODERN WOMAN FACING ANGST DUE TO MORALITY

Both Philosophers Nietzsche (1901) and Sartre (1943) emphasize on the social importance of morality rather than attempting to define right and wrong. For instance, they had somewhat distinct viewpoints on moral standards, despite having rather similar opinions about the role of

morality. This discrepancy can be explained by the developments that occurred over a number of decades.

Thus, the nineteenth century is defined by the growth of the industrial sector and the various technological advancements that people employed in the 20th century saw even more tremendous industrial and technological advancement that was nearly incompatible with the advancements of the preceding century. However, some people also discover the dreadful destructive power of such advancements and the complexity of the human condition, as some people go on to commit horrible atrocities.

When Zarri Bano appeals against her injustice stating that, "I am not a very religious individual. I am an educated woman from the twentieth century. I do not belong to the Mughal era."(Shahraz, 2001, p.87). Here she is sounding like a twentieth- century modern woman who knows her due rights; but when she comes to express her moral standards, there is a distinct discrepancy between her moral standards and her father's. While expressing her moral standards she says:

Yes, mother, today I have grown up. I am more than just your daughter or father's daughter. I am who I am! However, you and Father have cruelly taken away my identity as a woman and assigned me the status of a puppet. I'm here to follow his instructions. So I will. (Shahraz, 2001, p.87)

Zarri Bano in this passage emphasizes that she is more than just a daughter who is defined by her parents, claiming her own personal development and changing sense of identity. Although she is aware of her uniqueness and independence, she also accepts the unsettling fact that her parents have deprived her of her female agency. By calling herself a 'puppet,' she illustrates the degree of their authority over her life and implies that she must submit without question. She resigns herself to obeying commands in spite of her inner reluctance, either out of obligation or lack of choice. Her comments express a sadness over losing her freedom as well as a declaration of self-awareness.

She steadfastly expresses her discontent for the double moral standards of her father especially stating: "He (father) has created a woman from me by murdering me. Mother, did you not realize that in our culture, men are the real creators? They shape our lives and fates to suit their own whims and preferences." (Shahraz, 2001, p. 87)

With its themes of forced metamorphosis, identity loss, and patriarchal tyranny, the sentence, "He (father) has created a woman from me by murdering me." is highly symbolic. The

statement implies that she, who is most usually a young woman, has lost her autonomy and individuality and has been remolded into what society views as a "proper woman." But this change feels more like murder, the loss of the speaker's own aspirations, goals, and independence, than a normal or voluntary progression.

"Created a woman from me", suggests that the speaker was formerly independent, free-spirited, or had own goals, but that she was forced to conform to the traditional position of a woman as defined by her father and society. In many patriarchal countries, women are expected to exhibit submissiveness, obedience, and selflessness, all of which are likely to be a part of this transition. The statement implies that in this situation, being a 'woman' is a forced identity imposed by family and society norms rather than an empowering experience is a sign of Existential Angst.

The lack of control people have over their own life is highlighted in this remark, which portrays existential dread. In contrast to human free will, it implies that outside forces, whether they be authority people, society norms, or fate itself, determine personal experiences according to their own wishes. This concept is consistent with existentialist philosophy, which addresses the conflict between human agency and the factors that appear to be random in determining existence. The speaker feels helpless as a result of their aggravation, as though their identity and fate are being shaped against their will. In a world that frequently seems unconcerned with personal choice, the deeper existential battle of seeking purpose and self-determination is reflected in this sense of being manipulated by others.

At one point Zarri Bano during conversation with another Holy Woman (Nighat) as a woman of modern age, however, Nighat's reviews on becoming a Holy Woman differs from that of Zarri Bano's. One reason could be that she (Zarri) has just started her journey and has no experience of it. Therefore, she replies to Nighat, "In the intricate webs that our fathers and other male clan members have skillfully designed, we women look like beads." (Shahraz, 2001, p.175) Women's limited roles in patriarchal society, where male authority figures mold their identities and futures, are exemplified by this remark. Using the analogy of women as beads in a tapestry implies that women are tiny, ostentatious and thoughtfully positioned within a broader, male-controlled design. According to the metaphor, women are positioned in accordance with the expectations of their fathers and other male relatives rather than being granted the opportunity to choose their own options. Even though they are valuable individuals, they are ultimately viewed as components of a larger system rather than separate entities. This demonstrates the

lack of agency that women encounter as well as the ingrained gender norms that restrict their freedom in the name of morality. As concludes Shah (2024), while women's conception of freedom is restricted to being accessible for men's use and exploitation, males have the ability to pursue their wishes and choices. It implies that traditional ideas of freedom were created with a patriarchal framework in mind, giving preference to the agency and autonomy of men. Contrarily, women are frequently expected to live up to social norms and satisfy male demands, which limits their own agency and autonomy.

Thus, the customs and behaviors that restrict women and deem them as less valuable than males are prevalent in our workplaces, factories, households, social interactions, religion, education, textbooks, and the media. As a result, patriarchy is the culmination of the various forms of male dominance that we constantly witness in relation to women. According to this philosophy, women should be under the direction of males since men are superior to them and they are their property. This leads to women's servitude. In her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner discussed this topic and stated that there are clear benefits to using the term 'subordination of women' rather than 'oppression'. Being subordinate does not imply that the dominant person has malicious intent; rather, it opens the door for of his and the subordinate's cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* reveals the deep existential Angst experienced by the protagonist, Zarri Bano. Throughout the story, Shahraz skilfully explores the complexities of human existence, delving into Zarri Bano's struggles with identity, faith, morality and the search for meaning. Zarri Bano's existentialist Angst is characterized by her feelings of alienation, disorientation, and despair. She grapples with the absurdity of her circumstances, navigating the contradictions between her cultural heritage and personal aspirations. Through Zarri Bano's life experiences, Shahraz reminds us of all the problems women face while trying to find their meaning in life. Existential crisis provides springboard to Zarri Bano to justify her freedom and will decide on vital commitments and actions, just as Roquentin from Sartre's *Nausea* would. Roquentin was a victim of Nausea not an ailment that is physical, but rather a deep sense of hopelessness, fear, and loss of connection with real life, above all a feeling of detachment and meaninglessness of human existence. By highlighting those two examples, one can view Angst as a very motivating force that sometimes urges to make certain steps in one's life. It is also one more argument against the fact that humans could possibly confront with existentialist Angst:

the ensuing pressures from society actually contribute and magnify feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. Today, to measure one's success goes with prosperity, so society puts all kinds of pressures upon individuals to suit external demands. For case reference, a degree-holding young professional strives and crane for a career, and when it seems that one aspect of life is achieved, nothing happens to reduce one other level of worthlessness; rather, it grows, what with the realization that very achievements are all meaningless. Competition in life can result in a vicious cycle: the more one strives for acceptance, the more one does find oneself outside and progressively wanting.

In this view, however, the advocates for confronting existentialist Angst believe that such suffering can lead to a greater understanding of the self and personal growth. Laments over human existence, if they are made conscious, give one an opportunity to create one's own values and pursue what is worthwhile in life, turning Angst into a strong motive drive. A lesson from existentialism propounded by philosophers like Sartre (1943) and Camus, (1942) is that the individual must create his own meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. This perspective has comforted many, who interpret their Angst as motivation for making changes and growing as people.

Artistic and creative outlets become, therefore, powerful expressions through which those plagued by existentialist Angst can find voice. Countless painters and writers have infused their work with despair. Important examples include Kafka and Woolf, whose work demonstrates that existential angst can fuel creative output that expresses inner turmoil and builds bridges between people. Through the articulation of such art, it ceases to be an isolated experience between the self and its Angst and instead becomes something more communal, as the interconnectedness binds people together in that shared experience.

Besides, philosophical inquiry in general provides people with apt strength in facing the general existentialist Angst. The reading of existentialist literature like Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* - first published in 1946 could furnish individuals with paradigms through which to understand their experiences and find some purpose amid disorder. In doing so, they grow into resilient beings whose thoughts on their lives will then be based on agency that turns their Angst into a will for meaningful life.

Apart from the above, also helpful in providing practical guidance for one to meet with existentialist Angst is mindfulness and meditation practice; by living in the now, individuals become more attuned to their thoughts and emotions, enabling them to face their existential fears

without being weighed down in the process. Mindfulness practice is, for many, a way out of sickness and into support for anxieties centering on attitudes toward existence. This focus indicates how it is normal for all people to encounter existentialist Angst but suggests that one would be usefully assisted with intentional practices.

Last but not least, the group's contribution and relationships with the members therein become a great part of how each faces existentialist Angst. Many would find sympathy in one another through their similar experiences and open their fears and doubts to discussions with others. Support groups, friendships, and family connections provide a chance for expressing one's Angst, all the way to feeling a sense of community and understanding. For instance, discussing existential fears with similar people does create a belonging that assures one that they're not in their battles alone.

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