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REPRESENTATION OF SILENCE AND VOICE IN THE SELECTED NOVELS

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Article Info

Abstract

This paper discusses female silence and voice embodies in the selected Pakistani English novels namely The Holy Woman (2001) by Shahraz and Slum Child (2007) by Shah. Both the novels re-present sensitive issues of women marginalization in Pakistani society. This study examines that while dealing with the issues of women marginalization, whether the authors reinforce or challenge the gender stereotypes. To explore this, the present study applies Olsen's framework of "Silences" on the target texts. This framework does not merely focus on silences while it further interplays with voice. Following this framework and close reading textual analysis method, this study explores the concept of censorship silence and authorial silence as the two specific tools used by the authors to represent the chemistry of gender issues together with class, religion, and other socio-cultural dichotomy. Further, this analysis assists the researcher in understanding how the female narratives constrained, restrained and/or rebel/resist against the norms. Finally, the study argues that both the authors struggle in speaking for women under socio-cultural and religious taboos.

Keywords:

silence, censorship silence, authorial silence, voice.

INTRODUCTION

This present paper is a part of Zaib's PhD research thesis (2025) which aims at exploring the extent to which the selected authors reinforce or challenge the established gender stereotypes. Though, her PhD thesis analyses four novels, while this paper presents a brief analysis of only two novels entitled The Holy Woman (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz and Slum Child (2007) by Bina Shah. The aim of this paper is: "to examine that how far the selected authors subvert or strengthen gender stereotypes" in their narratives. Therefore, the study analyses the concepts of female silence and voice in the selected novels to deeply understand female representation in the stories.

This study takes key-concepts of Olsenian Silences (2003) as a framework to apply on the selected texts. Olsen's concepts provide a comprehensive understanding about what is said, what is left unsaid and why it is left unsaid in the texts. Therefore, this framework is considered suitable for this paper which assists in exploring all the binaries between voicing and silencing women marginalization.

Following textual close reading method of analyses, this paper highlights the underlying concepts of censorship and authorial silence through which the study examines the authors' strategies and techniques to strengthen or subvert the hegemonic forces that cause women marginalization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Holy Woman (2001) and Slum Child (2007) portray different cases of women marginalization in their traditional, cultural and religious scenarios. The Holy Woman (2001) presents the story of Zarri Bano, an educated beautiful young girl of 25, belongs to a feudal family of Habib. Zarri-Bano, being a feminist beauty queen, rejects several marriage proposals of landlords and wealthy people, but finally she falls in love with Sikandar, a handsome liberal wealthy, and intellectual young man from Karachi. However, before furnishing their love-affair into their relationship of marriage, a tragedy happens in her life with the death of her only brother, Jaffar. His death compels Habib to impose celibacy on Zarri-Bano and transforms her into a spiritual status of "Holy Woman" to make her heir of all of Habib's wealth. Then the narrative sways between this trajectory where Zarri-Bano adopts duality in her personality and lives as a feminist and feminine both. This narrative suppresses her emotional life and presents her journey of fake spirituality and so her marginalization in Pakistani society.

Contrary to this, Slum Child (2007) portrays Laila, a Christian girl of 9 years old, as a marginalized teen-ager living in the slum of Karachi. Through Laila's story, the narrative presents the struggles and marginalization of Christian minority in a Muslim society. Further, the author represents Laila as a resistant who attempts to overcome her hurdles by leaving her home, and experiencing the suffering of the outer world. She further comes back to home to kill a monster, Salim, of her life who seduces her and plans to sell her to be used in brothel. This novel puts light on religious minority Christian community and their daily life sufferings.

Numerous scholars have examined these novels from various perspectives, with a primary emphasis on feminist theories (e.g., Zia, 2009; Haleem, 2014; Sakinah, 2014; Hum, 2015; Shaheen, 2017; Asghar et al., 2018; Masood & Tehseem, 2022; Saeed et al., 2024). However, the application of Olsen's theoretical framework remains largely unexplored in this context. To offer a fresh perspective on the selected texts,

this study adopts Olsen's theory. The following section provides a brief overview of the key concepts within Olsen's framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tillie Olsen, an influential writer, activist, and feminist thinker, is best known for her short fiction and her seminal non-fiction work Silences (1978; 2003). Olsen writes those theoretical arguments in "Silences" that emerge directly from her lived experience as a working-class woman, mother, and writer who endured prolonged periods of creative silence. These personal experiences are not incidental to her analysis; rather, they form the foundation of her broader critique of the social and material conditions that inhibit artistic expression and literary production (p. 6–12).

Central to Olsen's theory is her concepts of censorship silences and authorial silences. In re-conceptualizing censorship, Olsen explains it as not merely a deliberate suppression of voices, but as a pervasive and structural phenomenon. She introduces this concept as a suppression of voices due to socio-economic and cultural forces that prevent individuals from writing the truth. These external forces include poverty, overwork, sexism, racial discrimination, lack of institutional support, and internalized feelings of unworthiness (p. 8). Crucially, these factors do not function in isolation but intersect and compound according to one's position within systems of power. For instance, while a white middle-class woman may be silenced by gendered norms, a Black working-class woman may face intersecting erasures rooted in both racism and economic precocity (p. 22). Due to utmost pressure of external forces, authors sometimes do not express their ideas freely and such suppression can be analyzed in their writings.

Olsen argues that authors often impose silence on themselves and their texts as a result of external pressures, such as censorship, political repression, or societal expectations. This internal or authorial silence can be identified through rhetorical choices such as fragmented narratives, absent or muted voices, and gaps in storytelling (see Booth 1987). For instance, an author may deliberately leave certain characters voiceless or omit critical events to reflect marginalization or trauma. Similarly, the use of ambiguous language or unresolved endings can signal the constraints under which the writer is working. According to Olsen, these forms of silence reveal the structural barriers that hinder writers from beginning, developing, or completing their creative work.

Olsen further argues that the literary canon commonly viewed as a collection of the "best" or most enduring works and it is instead the product of a selective process shaped by privilege, access, and material conditions. What survives and is celebrated reflects not only aesthetic merit but also what was able to be written, preserved, and supported (p. 38–40). Thus, the history of literature must also be read as a history of systemic omission.

These omissions, Olsen insists, are not random. They are manifestations of structural inequality. The absent voices in the canon are often those of individuals who lacked the time, space, and resources required for sustained literary labor. As Olsen poignantly notes, "the conditions for creating are not

given to most people and less to women than to men" (p. 280). This lack of access constitutes a powerful, if frequently unacknowledged, form of censorship.

By exposing the relationship between social marginalization and creative silence, Olsen's Silences challenges dominant literary historiographies and demands a re-examination of the conditions under which literature is produced and excluded. Her work invites scholars and readers alike to consider not only which voices have been heard, but also which have been systematically silenced, and why. Keeping this view, this present paper looks into the trajectory of what is said, what is left unsaid and why it is left unsaid in the selected texts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Following Olsenian framework, this paper analyzes the selected narratives using the close reading method. As a text-centered approach, close reading enables researchers to uncover underlying ideas through detailed and nuanced analysis. According to Cuddon, it is one of the most effective methods for literary scholars, as it allows for careful attention to language, tone, symbolism, and rhetorical devices (Zaib and Mashori, 2016). This method proves particularly useful for this study in examining the embedded themes of silence and voice, as well as the authors' implicit strategies in representing female experiences. The following section offers an in-depth discussion of the concepts revealed through this analytical approach.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following a systematic order, this paper first presents the analysis of The Holy Woman and then Slum Child.

Cultural and Religious Censorship in The Holy Woman

In The Holy Woman (2001), Shahraz navigates the complex interplay between gender, religion, and cultural norms through the character of Zarri Bano. Following the death of her only brother, Zarri Bano is compelled to assume the role of Shahzadi Ibadat that is an act of a spiritual celibacy, and it is not assumed out of personal conviction but as a culturally sanctioned form of sacrifice intended to uphold familial prestige. This forced identity is framed not as a spiritual enlightenment but as a performative adherence to patriarchal customs cloaked in religious justification. Shahraz's narrative subtly enacts a form of censorship through its strategic silences and restrained criticism, reflecting the pressures placed upon both character and author in conservative cultural contexts.

Zarri Bano's life is representative of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system in which women's autonomy is often surrendered to preserve male honor. Her father's decision to consecrate her as a "Holy Woman" following her brother's death reflects the intersection of cultural tradition and religious rhetoric. His declaration "there will be no marriage for you my daughter… we have decided that you should become a Holy Woman, a Shahzadi Ibadat" (p. 13), is steeped in spiritual vocabulary, masking the coercive nature of his authority. The narrative elevates this decision with reverent language: "She

would be holy, untouched by any man, her beauty sacrificed for family honour" (p. 113), thus romanticizing a loss that is, in essence, a denial of selfhood.

Drawing on literary theorist Olsen's (1978) notion that marginalized voices particularly those of women are often mediated through dominant ideologies, the novel presents Zarri Bano as a hybrid figure: a feminist consciousness caught within traditional structures. Early in the narrative, Zarri Bano asserts her modern, secular identity:

"I am not a very religious person, as you know. I am a twentieth century, modern, educated woman. I'm not living in the Mughal period—a pawn in a game of male chess..." (p. 85)

However, her resistance is short-lived. She soon relinquishes her stance and expresses her filial loyalty and acceptance of her imposed identity:

"I cannot let him or my family down" (p. 86)

"Here, I stand before you my father's Shahzadi Ibadat" (p. 87)

This oscillation reveals a deep internal conflict between personal agency and communal expectation. Shahraz refrains from overt critique of religious or cultural institutions, instead employing a narrative approach that critiques through implication and narrative restraint—a stylistic method aligned with Olsen's concept of "censorship of expression," where societal expectations circumscribe creative articulation.

Olsen (2003) emphasizes that such narrative silences are not indicative of conceptual voids but are shaped by external pressures that are social, religious, and political and they restrict what can be safely expressed. This dialectic of expression and suppression permeates the novel. In one emotionally charged confrontation with her mother, Zarri Bano articulates her sense of betrayal:

"You and Father have brutally stripped me of my identity… My father made me believe he would 'sell the world for me' when in fact he eventually decided to sell me to his male whim and ancient traditions" (p. 87)

Yet, despite this outburst, she later reasserts her choice as voluntary:

"I am doing this of my own free will. The tradition is ours, but in the end the decision is mine" (p. 123)
"Who says I'm going to be sacrificed?... What an important role it is?" (p. 124)

These contradictory statements highlight the psychological complexity of her character and the thematic ambivalence of the novel, where acceptance and resistance coexist. Shahraz's nuanced portrayal critiques patriarchal practices without directly challenging cultural norms seems her strategy that may reflect her negotiation with the limits of acceptable discourse in conservative contexts.

Zarri Bano's emotional and erotic life is notably underrepresented. While chapters 9 and 10 briefly explore her romantic longing for Sikandar such as the moment when she "physically recoiled, holding her arms against her chest as she recalled her feelings for Sikandar. Yes she wanted him" (p. 86), but her sexual agency is soon erased. The narrative reinterprets her desire as spiritual sacrifice that positions her future as one of religious mentorship: "a scholar of Islam, a moral and religious tutor for hundreds of younger women…" (p. 154). These shifts exemplify how the text silences or redirects female desire in accordance with socially acceptable roles.

These narrative omissions and re-framings are indicative of a broader pattern of suppression. Zarri Bano's internal turmoil is rendered in fleeting glimpses, suggesting that Shahraz's writing within a restrictive sociocultural context may have had to self-censor in order to publish her critique. As Olsen (1978) argues, such silences are not failures but manifestations of the constraints placed upon authors representing marginalized experiences.

In conservative South Asian Muslim societies, open criticism of religious or cultural authority is fraught with risk. Consequently, writers often resort to indirect modes of resistance. Shahraz adopts this strategy by portraying Zarri Bano not as an overt rebel, but as a multidimensional figure negotiating her position within an oppressive framework. Her outward compliance masks a private resistance, allowing the reader to access the deeper emotional and ideological currents beneath the narrative surface.

Thus, The Holy Woman emerges as a compelling example of how fiction operates under the pressures of cultural and religious censorship. The story of Zarri Bano is framed as a spiritual ascension that conceals a profound erasure of autonomy. Through controlled prose and suggestive silences, Shahraz reveals the emotional cost of patriarchal expectations without directly confronting them. These silences resonate with unspoken sorrow and quiet defiance, revealing the hidden mechanisms by which women's voices are shaped, restricted, and yet endure. In addition, Shahraz employs traditional institutions especially marriage not just as themes, but as instruments of narrative suppression.

Class and Religious Minority Silencing in Slum Child

In Slum Child (2007), Bina Shah explores a different dimension of narrative silencing that is shaped by socioeconomic marginalization and religious minority status. The novel centers on Laila, a young Christian girl growing up in the impoverished slums of Karachi. Told through Laila's first-person voice, the narrative captures the intersection of class-based oppression and religious exclusion. Her perspective is marked by both the innocence of youth and the burdens of systemic discrimination and acts as both a window into trauma and a veil that softens its expression. Shah uses this child's viewpoint not only as a stylistic choice but as a means of navigating sensitive themes while avoiding direct confrontation with dominant religious or political structures.

Laila's marginalization is rooted in her dual status: as a member of the Christian minority and as a child of the urban poor. Her observation (see p. 7) reveals entrenched structural inequalities. She claims that Christian girls, in particular, are prepared for a life of domestic labor and early marriage, with no mention of individual desire or autonomy. Laila narrates these realities without overt outrage, reflecting

how such norms are internalized and rendered invisible within the broader cultural discourse. Like Shahraz, Shah avoids explicit political critique, possibly in response to the limitations imposed by conservative readerships and social taboos. The choice of a child narrator thus becomes a literary shield, offering protection against potential backlash while still enabling the articulation of injustice.

A persistent tension runs through the novel between what is explicitly narrated and what remains implied. Laila's grief over her sister Jummana's death from tuberculosis, and her frustration with both medical institutions and gossiping neighbors, suggests a latent awareness of social inequity (pp. 110, 116). Yet these sentiments are fleeting and never evolve into sustained critique. Both Laila and the wider Christian community are rendered voiceless, epitomized in the literal silence of her mother, Amma, whose muteness becomes a powerful symbol of generational and systemic suppression.

Laila's Christian identity positions her outside the dominant religious and national imaginary of Pakistan. This exclusion subjects her to suspicion, hostility, and social isolation. Shah's portrayal reflects Olsen's (2003) assertion that marginalized individuals are often denied platforms for expression, their experiences filtered or omitted by hegemonic narratives. In Slum Child, religious erasure is subtle but pervasive; the Christian faith is treated as incompatible with Pakistani identity, and Laila gradually internalizes this belief. The physical marginalization of Issa Colony that is set on the city's periphery mirrors the symbolic exclusion of its inhabitants from national belonging.

This internalization of inferiority results in what Olsen (2003) terms "learned silence": the act of self-censorship developed through repeated experiences of rejection and shame (p. 28). Laila begins to hide her faith and cultural background, especially when she transfers to a Muslim-majority school. Her silence becomes protective, but also psychologically disfiguring. Olsen describes this as the development of a "deformed voice" (p. 33) that is one that speaks, but only in ways sanctioned by the dominant culture. In striving for acceptance, Laila gradually distances herself from her heritage, underscoring the emotional cost of cultural assimilation.

Sexual abuse represents another axis of silencing in Laila's life. Her molestation by Salim is narrated in a minimalistic tone:

"He touched me in ways I didn't like. I couldn't tell anyone" (p. 59).

The understated language intensifies the horror of the event. It reflects the ways in which gendered violence is normalized and silenced, particularly within marginalized communities where victims often lack both the means and the language to seek justice. Shah deliberately refrains from dramatization, instead using Laila's naïve voice to highlight the social mechanisms that discourage disclosure and protect perpetrators.

Through such moments, Slum Child reveals how religious affiliation, class, and gender intersect to silence not only individuals but entire communities. Laila's story is shaped by a dense network of cultural prohibitions and it shows that she is not silent by nature, but by necessity. Her voice, like that of

her mother and neighbors, is muted by structural forces that reward silence and punish dissent. These collective silences are not empty but densely layered with fear, grief, and unspoken resistance.

The next section will analyze how authorial strategies especially narrative voice and temporal structure that reinforce or subvert these patterns of silencing in both Slum Child and The Holy Woman.

Authorial Silence in The Holy Woman

In The Holy Woman, Shahraz employs an omniscient third-person narrator, whose presence is deliberately restrained, creating a tone of narrative neutrality that allows ideological critique to emerge indirectly. This authorial silence is manifested in moments where judgment is withheld and thus it functions as a strategic response to the cultural and religious constraints within which the novel is situated. The narration begins with a neutral, observational tone: "There was a flurry of activity at the villa" (p. 2). This opening serves as a panoramic introduction to the setting before gradually narrowing in on Zarri Bano and the unfolding family drama.

To vary perspective and deepen character development, Shahraz frequently integrates direct dialogue. This shift temporarily hands over narrative control to her characters, enabling them to articulate personal ideologies and tensions. For instance, Zarri Bano's feminist stance is clearly articulated in a conversation with her friend Ruby:

"I am not a fish to be angled at, caught and trapped, Ruby."

"I am sorry Baji Jan. That was unforgivable of me, especially knowing how you speak about such analogies—and with you being a feminist too." (p. 21)

Here, direct speech gives voice to Zarri Bano's personal resistance, momentarily foregrounding her agency. However, these episodes of character-centered narration are brief and interspersed with returns to the omniscient voice, such as in the understated observation of Sikandar's relationship with Jaffar:

"A friendship had quickly blossomed between the two men" (p. 9)

This shifting narrative stance resembles a "recessive-author" technique, where the narrator temporarily withdraws to let characters engage directly with the reader. A compelling example occurs in the dialogue between Fatima and her employer Shahzada:

"Please, Sahiba, don't cry. Of course, it will not come to that. It cannot happen to our Zarri Bano. It is both insane and cruel. How can a beautiful woman, ripe for marriage and children, be denied the role for which…" (p. 75)

Fatima's heartfelt protest is loaded with implicit critique, even as the narrator remains silent. The use of such moments where ideological resistance is voiced through dialogue rather than narration, demonstrates Shahraz's careful navigation of cultural boundaries. By allowing characters like Fatima to

question patriarchal practices without the narrator intervening, Shahraz avoids direct confrontation with religious or societal norms while still drawing attention to their injustices.

These narrative strategies align with Tillie Olsen's (1978) concept of "authorial silence," where structural forces compel writers to embed critique within accepted forms. The narrator's apparent objectivity masks an underlying tension, compelling readers to interpret subtext and identify unspoken critiques. In this way, the narrative invites an active engagement with its thematic undercurrents rather than delivering overt moral commentary.

Thus, the interplay between omniscient narration and direct dialogue becomes central to Shahraz's method of veiled resistance. While the narrator remains largely impartial, the voices of characters subtly express ethical dissonance, allowing the novel to critique patriarchal control without incurring cultural backlash. This narrative restraint becomes a deliberate form of dissent that is an authorial silence that speaks volumes through what it chooses not to say outright.

Unreliable Narration and Authorial Silence in Slum Child

In contrast to the omniscient narration of The Holy Woman, Shah's Slum Child utilizes a first-person narrative voice that is deeply personal yet selectively silent. The story unfolds through the eyes of Laila, a young Christian girl whose limited understanding and emotional vulnerability shape how events are interpreted and conveyed. This narrative subjectivity introduces a different form of authorial silence: one that emerges from the unreliability of the narrator and the strategic withholding of authorial judgment.

Laila's voice dominates the narrative, but it is not unmediated. Shah occasionally retreats from Laila's internal monologue, inserting brief moments of objective narration that create distance. For example, on page 7: "So it was Issa Colony. What had started off as a few huts…" This slight narrative shift from first- to third-person offers a fleeting moment of detachment before returning to Laila's emotional reflections. Such oscillations mimic the disorientation of memory and trauma, and they signal a narrative strategy that foregrounds the inner world of the protagonist while also maintaining critical distance. The result is a layered narrative in which the absence of authorial intervention becomes a tool for highlighting the limitations of Laila's understanding and the broader social forces shaping her life.

Dialogue plays a significant role in maintaining this subtlety. Conversations between characters reveal ideological conflicts and cultural tensions without overt narrative commentary. In one such exchange, Laila and her sister Jummana discuss their Muslim teacher:

"Why did she (Apa) keep you back, Laila?

I don't know.

Were you naughty? Did you disobey her?

I don't like her.

She is a perfectly nice woman. She was very good to me when I was in school." (p. 9)

The lack of authorial elaboration forces the reader to navigate the ambiguity independently. Shah resists the impulse to guide interpretation, choosing instead to let ideological tension emerge organically through character interaction. This narrative choice reflects a form of "indirect commentary," in which meaning is constructed through subtext rather than explicit narrative framing.

Temporal shifts further reinforce the theme of narrative fragmentation. Laila frequently oscillates between past and present, with memories triggered by emotional stimuli such as the recollection of her brother's death (p. 10). These disjointed timelines mimic the nature of trauma and suggest that certain truths can only be approached obliquely. Shah refrains from psychological exposition, allowing memory to speak in its own rhythm. This omission of interpretive guidance is another form of authorial silence, one that respects the complexity of lived experience.

While Laila's voice dominates the narrative, Shah subtly incorporates other perspectives that broaden the novel's ideological landscape. Characters like Apa and Meryam, or the unnamed Muslim woman in Part II, provide contrasting viewpoints, though these are always embedded in dialogue rather than narration. In this polyphonic structure, Laila's narration is central but never absolute. The author's silence encourages the reader to piece together ideological meanings from the narrative's emotional texture. This silence is not a void but a deliberate withholding, inviting critical reflection on the forces that render certain truths unspoken.

Ultimately, Slum Child constructs a narrative world where personal expression is constrained by class, religion, and gender. Through the use of a selectively unreliable narrator, fragmented temporality, and unmediated dialogue, Shah crafts a story that critiques systemic injustice without resorting to direct confrontation. Her authorial silence reflects not detachment, but an intentional resistance to narrative closure, allowing space for ambiguity, empathy, and reader interpretation.

Challenging and Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes in The Holy Woman and Slum Child

The analysis of censorship silence and authorial silence suggests that both the authors (Shahraz in The Holy Woman and Shah in Slum Child) engage deeply with the construction of gender roles in conservative Pakistani society. While each author presents a nuanced critique of patriarchy and the social conditioning of women, their approaches reveal a complex tension between challenging gender stereotypes and, at times, inadvertently reinforcing them through narrative structure and character resolution.

In The Holy Woman, Shahraz foregrounds gendered sacrifice through the character of Zarri Bano, a modern, educated woman who is stripped of autonomy following her brother's death. However, Shahraz complicates this reinforcement through narrative silences and indirect critique. By allowing characters like Fatima to voice opposition and embedding resistance in dialogue rather than narration, Shahraz subtly challenges gender norms while avoiding direct condemnation. The authorial silence thus becomes

a tool for critiquing, rather than endorsing, the cultural scripts that confine women to roles of moral guardianship and familial duty.

Similarly, in Slum Child, Shah critiques gendered expectations through the lens of class and religion. Laila, the young Christian narrator, is socialized into domestic subservience from a young age. Her future is imagined not as one of self-actualization, but of servitude and early marriage. Here, Shah challenges gender stereotypes through Laila's evolving awareness and growing discontent. Her inner conflict, her desire for education and her quiet rebellion against invisibility all suggest a desire to escape the constraints imposed on her gender and identity. Although the narrative does not offer overt emancipation, it gestures toward the possibility of resistance by presenting Laila as a thinking, feeling individual navigating a repressive environment.

In both the texts, stereotypical gender roles are presented not as immutable truths but as social constructs maintained through religious rhetoric, cultural pressure, and narrative framing. While elements of the plots may seem to reinforce traditional roles especially through endings that do not fully subvert patriarchal authority, the authors use narrative voice, character complexity, and strategic silences to interrogate these roles. Thus, Shahraz and Shah ultimately challenge gender stereotypes, albeit cautiously, revealing how deeply embedded such norms are and how resistance must often be encoded in subtle, culturally legible forms.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine whether the selected authors challenge or reinforce traditional norms that contribute to the marginalization of women. In addressing this gender issue, the paper focuses on the representations of female silence and voice in the selected narratives.

The two chosen texts entitled as The Holy Woman by Qaisra Shahraz and Slum Child by Bina Shah, depict female marginalization across varying socio-cultural and religious contexts. Through the lens of the Olsenian perspective, these narratives reveal both censorship silences and authorial silences. The concept of censorship emphasizes the role of external forces, such as religion and culture, in constraining authors from confronting social taboos directly. Shahraz, for instance, portrays the story of Zarri Bano within a structurally conventional narrative, implicitly illustrating religious censorship and patriarchal norms without overt critique. Similarly, Shah presents the character of Laila within a socio-culturally accepted narrative framework, where the marginalization of a religious minority is depicted as a legitimate reflection of systemic discrimination in Pakistani Muslim society.

Although neither author engages in explicit critique of hegemonic forces whether external (religious, cultural) or internal (psychological, familial), both subtly subvert gender stereotypes through narrative strategies and rhetorical choices. Shah's employment of polyphonic narration and Shahraz's use of an omniscient third-person perspective suggest a deliberate attempt to challenge the gender-based discrimination portrayed in their respective works.

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