

**“A Room of One’s Own” in *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*: The
(Mad)woman Writer in the Short Stories of Daniyal Mueenuddin**



Shanjida Nowshin Chowdhury

221055040

Department of English and Humanities

Fall 2022

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the Short Stories of Daniyal Mueenuddin**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Humanities
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
MA in English

Shanjida Nowshin Chowdhury

221055040

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam

Fall 2022

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam

Professor

Department of English and Humanities

DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



Shanjida Nowshin Chowdhury

221055040

Department of English and Humanities

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated, upon his request, to my father, Md. Gous-Ul-Azam Chowdhury, who likes to remind me every so often of how I did not dedicate my last thesis to him.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam for his support and guidance in writing this thesis. I would also like to thank Prof. Elora Halim Chowdhury, who has been a huge influence on my understanding of feminism and whose teachings have played a great role in determining the direction this thesis took.

I am grateful to the Department of English and Humanities and all of its distinguished faculty members who have all had a hand in making me the person I am today. In particular I would like to thank Prof. Shamsad Mortuza, whose work has been a great source of inspiration for my own, as well as Ms. Arifa Rahman, Ms. Nadia Rahman, Dr. Sohana Manzoor, and Dr. Tabassum Zaman for being a constant source of support during my time at ULAB.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge and convey my deepest gratitude to my parents, my brother, and my friends whose unconditional love and support have kept me sane and motivated during the rigorous process of putting this thesis together.

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Abstract

A central theme of Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, is the structural oppression of women in Punjab, Pakistan. The primary discourse surrounding Mueenuddin's debut short story collection by critics and readers alike have mainly focused on the ill treatment of women by men and the feudal patriarchal system at the backdrop of the eight interconnected stories. While it is true that the women of Mueenuddin's short stories are all victims of their circumstances, the narrative being told is not one of victimhood. In my thesis, I intend to shift the conversation regarding female oppression in *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* from one of resistance to one of resilience and rebellion. The aim of this research is to draw parallels between the female characters of Mueenuddin's short stories and the characterization of the "woman writer" as discussed in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. In doing so I will be showing how the female characters of Daniyal Mueenuddin's short stories are not simply passive victims of the patriarchy, but rather are women attempting to take control of their own narratives in whatever capacity they are able to.

Keywords: *authorship, agency, patriarchy, pen, woman writer*

Chapter One

Introduction

“Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.”

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

I begin with this quote by Virginia Woolf to emphasize the sheer vitality of the human mind that allows one's imagination to soar over borders the body dare not cross. Female suffering, particularly that of women of color, in literary discourse is often abject to a state of victimhood that paints them as dehumanized puppets devoid of free will or free thought. While there is no point in denying the structural violence on gendered bodies that is prevalent not only in the global south but the world in its entirety, to generalize female characters as mere victims of the patriarchy does a disservice to the intellect and ambition that make up their humanity and allow them to negotiate their agency in a patriarchal society. It is this predicament precisely that I wish to bring forward in my analysis of female subjectivity in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*.

1.1 Exploring Mueenuddin's Literary Journey

Daniyal Mueenuddin is a Pakistani-American author and a major name in the Pakistani short story genre. His debut short story collection, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* came out in 2009 and immediately garnered the attention of critics and readers alike, receiving prestigious prizes such as The Story Prize, The Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and the National Book Award of 2009. Aside from this, Mueenuddin's debut collection also made it as the finalist for

the 2010 Pulitzer Prize and the top ten lists of almost every prestigious best book of the year list in 2009.

Mueenuddin's collection, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* consists of eight stories focusing on corruption, class inequality and patriarchy in Pakistan. Though all eight stories exist independently of one another with each focusing on the trials and tribulations of one particular character, they are all connected through the character of K.K. Harouni, a powerful but benevolent landlord who holds varying degrees of control over the lives of all the characters in the stories. Many have described Mueenuddin's approach to writing as "projecting social realism, in a fictionalized manner" (Ahmad and Sheeraz 286), due to his raw depiction of the structural violence against women and servants. While this raw depiction of suffering is one of the reasons his writing has received such high acclaim, many have argued regarding Mueenuddin's intentions due to his unfiltered depiction of suffering in the lower class, going as far as to call out his "sexist attitude" (Afzal and Sheikh 39) in his representation of women. Amidst all this, Mueenuddin has remained adamant that his writing is in no way intended to make a political statement and is instead merely a reflection of his own observations and experiences, stating, "if I were writing about those things I would be an economist or a political scientist. The story is only faithful to itself. It doesn't have a message. It certainly is not an analysis of society: it's a description of society. The analysis, if any, should be done by the reader" (58).

Mueenuddin has not had any major releases in the literature scene since he made waves with *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* in 2009. Despite his decade long hiatus from the publishing world, his short stories and the depiction of women in particular, is still greatly discussed among readers and scholars today, something I will explore in more detail in the

literature review of my research. Amidst the debate of whether Mueenuddin intended to make a statement or if he was merely sexist in his observations, a general consensus surrounding his debut book is the lack of autonomy in his female characters. It is this particular vignette of the discourse of Mueenuddin's literary work that I intend to make the focus of my study.

1.2 Looking Beyond Victimhood

My central argument in this thesis, that the stories of Mueenuddin's female characters are not of victimhood, stems from current discourses in the human rights and development industry. The intersection of the humanities with human rights discourse in recent years has allowed for a more holistic review of how "developed" or western countries interact with the global south. Crystal Parikh speaks of this in her book, *Writing Human Rights*, pointing out that, "human rights discourse has readily been conflated with liberal humanitarianism...such liberal humanitarianism evacuates political subjectivity and social desire from those whom it addresses, ascribing to them instead abject victimhood." (3). Parikh's criticism of the human rights industry calls out the ethical greyness in western regions', particularly the United States', supplementing of a savior narrative that pushes the people they are trying to help into the roles of helpless victims. As Parikh, puts it, "The objects of humanitarian campaigns—almost always located elsewhere than the United States—are ones whose (bare) life must be saved and whose personhood must be (re)made to reflect suppositions of the American good life." (3). This concept of erasing one's humanity through their abjection into a state of victimhood as pointed out by Parikh is a fundamental theme in my research where I point out how the reading of Mueenuddin's female characters as mere victims is an erasure of their humanity.

Parikh's statement argues that the denial of one's humanity through the narrative of victimhood comes from the disregard of that victim's "political subjectivity and social desire" (3). A big reason for this in both human rights discourses and the existing research of Mueenuddin's work is the overgeneralization of women's experiences. An overwhelming percentage of the scholarship produced on *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, focuses only on the women in the lower class and allowing that to be presented as the experience of all the women in the book. The lack of intersectionality and nuance is an issue that exists in various branches of feminism. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty have famously spoken out about the lacking in mainstream feminism to account for the diverse and nuanced experiences of women in the global south. As Mohanty says in her own words:

What characterizes women as a group is their gender (sociologically not necessarily biologically defined) over and above everything else, indicating a monolithic notion of sexual difference. Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited. Such simplistic formulations are both historically reductive; they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppression. (73).

Mohanty is not the only one to point out the lack of nuance in certain branches of feminism. The debate between "victim feminism" (a branch of feminism that view women as victims of the patriarchy) and "power feminism" (a branch of feminism that oppose the victim narrative and view women as agents) has resulted in years of tension between feminists trying to fit women into a box. Scholars such as Elizabeth Schneider has criticized this binary

understanding of power structures, stating that, “Portrayal of women as solely victims or agents is neither accurate nor adequate to explain the complex realities of women's lives. It is crucial for feminists and feminist legal theorists to understand and explore the role of both victimization and agency in women's lives, and to translate these understandings into the theory and practice that we develop.” (389).

This exploration of the nuances of the female experience is another key part of why this thesis seeks to look beyond victimhood and get a better understanding of the roles played by the female characters of Mueenuddin’s stories beyond what is assigned to them by the patriarchy.

1.3 The Schemer as a Writer

As previously stated, the aim of this paper is to look beyond victimhood and explore the ways the female characters of Mueenuddin’s book negotiate their agency. To do this I will be placing the scheming woman, trying to get ahead in life, in the position of a writer attempting to take control over her own narrative. This comparison has its roots in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* where the angel and monster dichotomy of women’s representation in literature by men characterize women who attempt the pen as monsters (who plot, scheme, and manipulate).

Gilbert and Gubar begin by asking, “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” (3). The conversation that commences shows how the act of writing or ‘fathering a text’ has historically been considered a male gift; “Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power” (Gilbert and Gubar 4). The act of writing thus becomes exclusive to men, and “women attempting the pen” (Finch qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 7) become contestations to the natural order of the world. As Gilbert and Gubar write, “Not only is “a

woman that attempts the pen" an intrusive and "presumptuous Creature," she is absolutely unredeemable: no virtue can outweigh the "fault" of her presumption because she has grotesquely crossed boundaries dictated by Nature" (8). Due to the unwomanliness of writing as stated by men, the act of scheming, plotting, and manipulating, things that require creative power and have been deemed the 'male gift', are associated with the 'monster' depiction of women in men's writing. Considering the moral greyness of Mueenuddin's female characters, this thesis will be drawing parallels between the schemer who plots and plans, and the (mad)woman writer as described by Gilbert and Gubar. In addition to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* will also be consulted to draw comparisons and facilitate further analysis of the shared issues faced by both Mueenuddin's female characters and the woman writer.

It must be noted that the goal of this comparison is not to commend madness as a central element in the construction of a woman writer. The purpose of this comparison is to elaborate on Gilbert and Gubar's concept of 'monstrous autonomy'; the ability of the monster woman (the schemer) to break free of the role prescribed to her by the patriarchy and carve her own path. As stated by Gilbert and Gubar in their own words:

...the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay "his" anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained "place" and thus generates a story that "gets away" from its author. (28).

My analysis thus will look, not at the morality of Mueenuddin's female characters, but at their ability to scheme and plot in order to get ahead. Moving around chess pieces, not to win but to

survive. Just like the female author takes pleasure in writing though she cannot publish or author her own text, the women of Mueenuddin's stories scheme for pleasure and for survival all while knowing that this is a battle they must ultimately lose. Therefore, what I aim to bring to light is the autonomy that exists in the act of writing (or scheming) itself regardless of whether or not the text is successfully published by its authoress.

1.4 Research Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this research is to show through the comparison of the female characters in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, and the figure of the 'woman writer' as prescribed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, that the women of Mueenuddin's story are not absolute victims and do possess varying levels of agency and autonomy. Accordingly, the research questions this thesis seeks to explore are:

1. How are the female characters of Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* similar to the figure of the 'woman writer' as described by Gilbert and Gubar, and Virginia Woolf?
2. How do the women of Mueenuddin's short stories showcase their 'monstrous autonomy' through their ability to scheme and plot?
3. What role does money and privacy play in Mueenuddin's female character's ability to exercise their agency?

Methodology and Chapter Outline:

This research will be employing a qualitative method to carry out its analysis. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Angel-Monster Dichotomy in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) will serve as the primary theoretical text consulted in the analysis of this thesis. Additionally, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) will also be consulted to facilitate further discussion regarding the conditions required for a woman to write (or a schemer to scheme).

This thesis consists of five chapters. In the first chapter I will be introducing the background information and theoretical concepts my thesis draws upon to construct its arguments. The second chapter provides a thorough review on the trends and gaps in the existing research on Mueenuddin's work. For my analysis chapters, I take direct inspiration from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* where she states that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (7). Accordingly, chapters three and four look at the role money and space (privacy) respectively play in the ability of the female characters of Mueenuddin's short stories to exercise their agency. I conclude my argument in chapter five by returning again to the core issues that birthed my analysis; the question of victimhood and agency characterized in Mueenuddin's depiction of female struggles.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Since its publication in 2009, *In Other Rooms, Other Places* has been the subject of a substantial though not extensive amount of published scholarly research. Most of the existing research, as I have previously mentioned, focuses on the oppression of female characters and the feudal nature of master-slave relationships in Pakistani culture as depicted in the short stories. The selection of texts in this literature review was conducted with the intention of demonstrating certain thematical trends in the existing research of Mueenuddin's work. Accordingly, this literature review has been divided into two sections that bring the two main themes of the discourse surrounding Mueenuddin's body of work to light. The first section reviews mostly feminist research which explores the treatment of women in the short stories and the second section explores the discourse surrounding *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* as a piece of transnational or postcolonial fiction.

2.1 Patriarchy and Oppression

Almas and Akhtar's paper investigates the status of women as the subaltern in a patriarchal Pakistani society as depicted in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*. The paper borrows Gayatri Spivak's theories of subalternity, most notably her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to demonstrate how the female characters of Mueenuddin's short stories are oppressed and deprived of agency due to unjust patriarchal systems. The paper also observes the dynamic between male and female characters within a "master-slave dialect, where women are important only insofar as they serve and obey their master" (Almas and Akhtar 67). The research takes a very straightforward and traditional approach in its application of Spivak's

theory to produce a textual analysis of Mueenuddin's work. Almas and Akhtar's argument is centered on Spivak's idea that "Subalterns cannot speak because the voice and the agency of these women are inscribed in patriarchal codes." (72). The paper goes on to prove with textual reference how the objectification of women condemns them to a status of being "owned" by men. Additionally, the female character's reliance on men for economic gain put them in a position where they are unable to speak up for themselves or exercise their agency. The findings of this research though able to justify its claims, is limited by its boxing in of the female characters as the subaltern who do not exist outside of their relationship to men. By attributing all the female characters of the story to a benchmark standard as a subaltern, the study disables its ability to explore the individuality of the female characters thereby limiting the scope of bringing to light any issues that are not inherently apparent in the primary text itself.

The paper by Arshad et al. offers similar findings to Almas and Akhtar but through a different lens. Putting the objectification of women at the center of their criticism of the patriarchy, Arshad et al. attempts to prove how objectification leads to the subjugation of women by looking at "the objectification of women through the lenses of female characters selected from three short stories" (49) in Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*. The paper employs ideas of objectification originally proposed by Martha Nussbaum and then further extended by Rae Langton to show how the ten features of objectification put forward by Nussbaum and Langton unfold in the stories "Saleema", "Provide, Provide", "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders". Using several examples from the text to prove how the male characters' treatment of women in the short stories resist acknowledging the female character's autonomy, this study shows how the female characters appear no more than mere objects in the patriarchal landscape of Pakistan. The paper further argues that it is because of this objectification that the

women in the short stories are unable to voice their concerns or access basic human rights. It must be noted that this paper only deals with stories that depict the hardships of women from the lower class. The plights of the female characters from the upper class are mostly ignored by the paper primarily to boil the analysis to the simple conclusion that “these short stories reveal the brutality of the privileged class and sufferings of the poor class” (Arshad et al. 60). The glossing over of the hardships of women from a higher economic position is another common thread that links many of the papers in this literature review together and is a gap in the discourse surrounding Mueenuddin’s work that I intend to discuss further later on in my paper.

Tanvir and Amir also take a keen interest in the depiction of the suffering of female characters from the lower class in their deconstructive analysis of the short story “Saleema”. Unlike the previous two papers however, this study attempts to dismantle the “feminist reading” of the story through deconstruction and subvert “the power dynamics of the patriarchal Pakistani Society” (Tanvir and Amir 60). Offering a completely different conclusion from the previous two papers, Tanvir and Amir argue that the main female character of the story, Saleema is not oppressed at all and in fact is the one who “uses and manipulates others to gain personal benefits” (66). In many ways Tanvir and Amir’s argument bears resemblance to the argument of my thesis. However, the depiction of power relations as fixed binaries rather than something that is constantly being negotiated by the main character leads to a form of over correction from the depiction of women as powerless in previous studies. Though Tanvir and Amir seek out to show Saleema as a character who is resilient and powerful, their complete one-eighty of the power relations between the male and female characters in “Saleema” does little to add nuance to the complex relationships in the story and instead introduces the same oppressor-oppressed narrative of previous existing research only in a new form.

Similar to Tanvir and Amir's Paper, Mishra's article also takes a look at the binaries in *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*. However, whereas Tanvir and Amir's analysis stopped with the identification of boundaries, Mishra's paper uses the binaries of "oppressor v/s oppressed, rural v/s urban, elite v/s poor" (2) to provide a more intersectional perspective on how the patriarchy is experienced differently by people in different parts of the Pakistani diaspora. Mishra's research is one of the few papers among the existing literature on Mueenuddin's work that gives attention to women from the higher class. However, the role of upper-class women in Mishra's analysis serves mostly to contrast the struggles of the female characters from the lower class. Mishra's argument states that "women from rural areas are greater victims of patriarchy and get fewer chances to receive education and public awareness than women in urban areas" (4). Her analysis provides great insight into how access to money and education liberate women of the upper class from experiencing the wrath of the patriarchy as intensely as women of the lower class. Though Mishra's paper allows progress in the gender and patriarchy related discourse surrounding Mueenuddin's short stories, her research surrenders to the same narrative of victimization being the defining trait of the lower-class women of the story.

Khan et al.'s article looks at the ways "patriarchal institutions promote women's suppression and subjugation." (229) in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* and Bapsi Sidwa's *The Crow Eaters*. The paper takes a close look at the different mechanisms that allow a patriarchal system to run as well as the role women play in their own subjugation. Using the title story of Mueenuddin's collection as the primary textual evidence, Khan et al. discusses how in a competitive society where women must rely on men for economic survival, women "belonging to the upper class become tormentors for the poor ladies [sic]" (Kahn et al. 235) and in the process enable the smooth running of the existing patriarchal norm. The study

also goes into detail about the importance of money in a patriarchy. Particularly in a feudal setting where the economy is concentrated in the pockets of a few upper-class men, money can impact not just how men treat women but also how women treat each other. Though the paper offers a thorough description of the history and the patriarchy and extends itself as a contribution to the analysis of patriarchy in Pakistani settings, the research itself does not offer much beyond the competitive nature of women and the role of money in the maintenance of the patriarchy.

Taking the concept of men and women's treatment of women beyond the pages and into the intentions of the writer, Afzal and Sheikh's paper uses Sara Mill's feminist stylistic framework to compare the depiction of women in the writings of Daniyal Mueenuddin and Qaisra Shahraz. Using Mueenuddin's "Saleema" and Shahraz's "Zamindar's Wife" as specimen, Afzal and Sheikh offer a comparative analysis showing how the two writers have completely different approaches in how they represent women. Afzal and Sheikh argue that Mueenuddin's writing is coded with sexism due its depiction of female characters who are overpowered and beaten down. The findings of their paper indicate that "sexism and gender bias against women dominate in Mueenuddin's writing who has tried to maintain the male status quo unchallenged." (Afzal and Sheikh 39). Offering a completely different interpretation from Tanvir and Amir's reading of "Saleema", Afzal and Sheikh question the sexist motives behind Mueenuddin's writing due to his depiction of the character as "weak, fragile and passive, with beauty as their only merit." (41). Though Afzal and Sheikh's paper provides its evidence and reasoning behind its bold claims, the reading of Saleema as a character who is weak is far too much of an oversimplification for the rest of the argument in the paper to be justified. The paper frequently confuses the narrative voice of the story with Mueenuddin's intentions as a writer thereby often

mistaking the story's attempt at highlighting hypocrisy or patriarchal practices for sexism in itself.

2.2 Mueenuddin as a Postcolonial and Transnational writer

Hai's research extends the role of the subaltern not only to women but also to the men of Mueenuddin's short stories. The paper closely examines the network of domestic servants in the short stories to comment on Mueenuddin's strategic representation of the subaltern which "explore servant interiority and highlight the interlocking systems of power that dehumanize stigmatized subaltern individuals locked in domestic servitude." (Hai 33). Hai's paper recognizes Mueenuddin's collection as a piece of transnational literature that subverts the typical representations of servants in the works of previous post-colonial writers in English. Hai writes, "a foundational tradition for Anglophone postcolonial writers, servants are either absent as protagonists...or present not as representations of actual servants or any historical underclass but to serve a variety of aesthetic or narrational purposes" (34). The paper continues its argument by showcasing through textual and character analysis how Mueenuddin's presentation of servants as the protagonists of his stories, allows for a more holistic reading of their positions as the subalterns of postcolonial Pakistani society. The complex portrayal of characters of a lower economic class enables a process of defamiliarization in which the reader is able to see the essence of a character beyond their victimhood in spite of the extreme oppressive nature of their circumstances.

Shamaila Dodhy's paper on the appropriation of colonial practices in Mueenuddin's "Saleema" offers a postcolonial and Marxist look at how Pakistani lords appropriate the behavior of British colonizers in the emergence of a new postcolonial Pakistan. The paper uses Marxist

ideas of revolution to show how even after its independence, colonialism continues in Pakistan as the old oppressors are replaced with new ones; “postcolonial is simply a polite way of saying not white, or not Europe-but-inside-Europe” (Ahmed qtd. in Dodhy 235). Dodhy explores in detail how the elite of Pakistan suffer from a process of hybridity due to the previous colonization of the country. Though colonization impacts everyone, the status of those in the lower economic class remains mostly unchanged while the elite find themselves in a unique position where they are able to rise up from the position of the oppressed and fill the shoes of the oppressor. Dodhy argues that the elite society of Pakistan are “in a state of diaspora” (254) where they cannot fully identify the East or the west. The paper provides this as the primary reason for the elite class’s ill treatment of the lower class, stating, “They have been dispersed from the original ‘centre’ to ‘peripheral’ foreign regions. They fail to retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland, its history and achievements. They have not fully realized their identity, so they feel partly alienated and partly offended from it.” (Dodhy 254). This alienation from one’s national identity, according to Dodhy is a primary reason for the feudal system of Pakistan where the subalterns are cemented into their positions with no ability for real social or economic growth.

Like Dodhi, Ahmad and Sheeraz also speaks on the rise of the new colonizer by speaking on Mueenuddin’s contribution along with other Pakistani short story writers in keeping alive the “tradition of projecting social realism, in a fictionalized manner, about pre and post-independence Pakistan and Pakistani society” (286). The main focus of this paper is in examining how the use of social realism in the Pakistani short story genre has allowed for a depiction of postcolonial Pakistan that go against the traditional narrative of progress and depict Pakistan for what it truly is. Ahmad and Sheeraz credit Mueenuddin as a leading name in the

Pakistani social realism genre for his depiction of the uncomfortable reality of servants and women in a post-independence Pakistan. Mueenuddin's presentation of the social truth, particularly regarding the socioeconomic treatment of women, according to Ahmad and Sheeraz demystifies any sense of romanticism that exists in the grand narrative of postcolonial Pakistan. They write, "Many of Mueenuddin's female characters are frequently found in compromising states... we come across many such accounts of the silent men who overlook the compromises that their women make. This realism slaps down the popular *ghairat* narrative of the society according to which sex is a shameful thing but could be enjoyed secretly if it was economically convenient" (Ahmad and Sheeraz 289-290).

Nazir et al., going against the grains of Hai and, Ahmad and Sheeraz's arguments attempts to criticize Mueenuddin's status as a postcolonial writer. Whereas some of the previous research papers viewed Mueenuddin's depiction of servitude and the subaltern as exemplary of social realism, Nazir et al. criticizes this particular attribute as clinging to colonialism. As stated in the paper, "Despite his 'postcolonial' status, then, Mueenuddin portrays an imperialist mentality focusing on familiar oriental binarisms and can be read as an apostle preaching (neo)colonial desires." (Nazir et al. 286). The central thesis of the paper is formed around "Huggan's notion of contemporary postcolonial representations as often being cultural sell-outs" (Nazir et al. 286). The paper attempts to prove, by using the example of lower-class characters in the stories, how Mueenuddin's body of work is an example of "global commodification of cultural difference" (284). Similar to Afzal and Sheikh's paper, Nazir et al. also suffer from mixing the narrative voice of the story with the author's intent thereby formulating an analysis based off a reading of the text that takes everything at face value. For instance, Nazir et al. at one point in their analysis accuse Mueenuddin of rendering the orient a "mute spectator" and playing

on the “myth of the lazy native” (290). This argument stems from Mueenuddin’s depiction of certain characters from lower economic class as poor speakers of English and thereby dehumanized as less intelligent creatures. Nazir et al. state, “The ‘others’ in these stories...are not allowed equal status as human beings as the postcolonial representatives, clinging to colonial power structures, don’t consider them fully developed human-beings” (289).

Javaid et al.’s paper is one of the few papers on Mueenuddin’s work that have the elite class as its main focus instead of the lower class. Focusing on the stories “Lily” and “Our Lady in Paris”, the paper stipulates the hybridity of upper-class Pakistani culture. Using Homi Bhabha’s idea of ‘third space’ and ‘mimicry’, the paper shows how Mueenuddin “not only portrays class segregation of contemporary Pakistani society but also significantly depicts the secularized, westernized and liberal Pakistani elitist class, which gives a glimpse of cultural hybridity and diversity within Pakistani society.” (Javaid et al. 22). This paper serves an important role in the discourse around Mueenuddin’s work due its discussion of the identity crisis of upper-class Pakistani men and women. The supposed “westernized ways” (Javaid et al. 26) of the elite women in Mueenuddin’s universe gives way to more nuanced conversations regarding how cultural identity impacts the way women explore their agency. Whereas ‘lower-class’ characters such as Husna and Saleema from the other stories of Mueenuddin’s collection “are shown to be manipulated and dominated at the hands of men, who are the by-products of male-chauvinism and ultimate patriarchal authority” (22), Javaid et al. argue that the position of the elite as being suspended between the east and west allow for the breaking of cultural rules in an otherwise strict and controlling patriarchal society.

Humaira Tariq’s paper offers a Marxist reading of Mueenuddin’s *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* that looks closely into Pakistani feudalism and how it works in the context of the

stories. Using Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* as its theoretical backbone, Tariq attempts to figure out "to what extent or how far a socio economic revolution which is integral to Marx and Engels philosophy, [sic] suggested by Mueenuddin" (33). Tariq in this paper also provides a comparative analysis of the Pakistani feudal system as depicted in Mueenuddin's stories versus the portrayal of Pakistani feudalism in the media. In terms of findings, Tariq's paper lends its voice to the various other research of Mueenuddin's work that comment on how the feudal system of Pakistan deprive women and lower-class men of power and money. However, what makes this paper a valuable addition to the literary interpretations Mueenuddin's work is its description of Pakistani feudalism in the real world compared to what is shown in Mueenuddin's stories. In their comparison of Mueenuddin's depiction of feudalism to the real-life feudal system of Pakistan, Tariq states that "Mueenuddin's portrayal of the feudal ruling class is mild and forgiving." (40). Perhaps due to his dedication to realism, "The central feudal character [sic], Harouni is shown to be a compassionate and understanding person." (Tariq 40). This, according to Tariq complicates the binary of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, thereby diluting the urgency of revolution and building of a new socioeconomic system.

Most of the existing research on Mueenuddin's work lean towards either feminist, postcolonial or Marxist analysis of his short stories. As demonstrated above, the narrative of the victimized woman is an overwhelming presence that exists in almost all of the articles I have consulted for this literature review. Aside from this, the existing research of Mueenuddin's work also exhibits a tendency of approaching the female characters of the stories as the 'other' thereby creating distance between the characters and the analytic voice of the researcher. Thus, the research gap I have identified and am attempting to fill in this thesis, is a need for a feminist

critique from within that employs psychoanalytic and feminist theories to look at how the women of Mueenuddin's stories negotiate their agency and oppression from their own perspectives.

Chapter Three

Money and Madness

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf makes a point of elaborating how a reason why men are able to write fiction with greater ease is that they have the ability to not just make and own money, but to pass that money along with a tradition of writing down to their sons and grandsons. Women on the other hand must depend on men for economic gain since, “in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned” (Woolf 27). Thus, to yield a pen, one needs more than simply the gift of creativity. They must also be in possession of money. Like the women in Virginia Woolf’s day and age, the women of the feudal patriarchal world of *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, must also rely on men for economic sustenance. Since money in this literary universe is an exclusively male tool, one must question as Gilbert and Gubar once did, “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?” (7).

In Mueenuddin’s literary universe, the men who write are the men who have money. Since a woman in this world cannot have a pen of her own, she must steal the man’s pen if she is to write her own story. Thus, for a woman to control a pen she must first control the man whose pen she intends to steal. And if the man is a text’s “father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (Gilbert and Gubar 6), the woman must prepare herself to become the conniving evil step mother who is bold enough to take his place. In this chapter I will be looking at the role money plays in a woman’s ability to exercise her agency. To do this I will first look at how the female characters of Mueenuddin’s stories use sex as a way of controlling men and climbing up the socioeconomic ladder. Then in

the second half of the chapter I will explain what ensues once a woman has gained control of the pen.

3.1 Selling Stories

As previously mentioned, in the world of *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, the only way for a woman to write her own story is by gaining control over a man and making his pen her own. To do this, the women in the stories must lock their true selves away and be ready to play whatever role is required of them to lure the men into their traps. This power of manipulation is a trademark characteristic of every female character written by Mueenuddin in *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, explored most extensively in the short stories “Provide, Provide”, “In Other Rooms, Other Wonders”, and “Saleema”. All three of these stories depict women of the lower-class having affairs with much older and wealthier men in order to improve their socioeconomic positions. Though neither of the women in the stories are able to emerge victorious in the end, the extent of their agency while they are in a relationship with the older men is a testament to how money is crucial for the women to take control of their narratives.

“Provide, Provide” and “In Other Rooms, Other Wonders” have eerily similar plots. They both tell the stories of lower-class women who elevate their social status through affairs with rich lords but are then forced to return to their previous socioeconomic positions after those men pass away. Despite the similarities in the chain of events, the tactics the women use and the ultimate reason for their demise are quite different. While Zainab from “Provide, Provide” targets her victim with sexual advances, Husna from “In Other Rooms, Other Wonders” makes her mark by appealing to emotionality and loneliness of a powerful man nearing the end of his life.

“Provide, Provide” and “Saleema”, which will be discussed later on, are two of the most sexually charged stories in the collection. Though all eight stories refer to sex as a key component of the book’s patriarchal landscape, the language used to describe sex in these two stories are noticeably more graphic than the others. For “Provide, Provide”, which is narrated in the third person from the perspective of Chaudrey Jaglani, the sexually explicit language derives from the male gaze and the way in which Jaglani perceives, Zainab, the woman he has an affair with. It is due to his lustful gaze of the woman who tricks him, that Zainab’s manipulation of Jaglani is so readily apparent to the reader even though the story is not told from her perspective. Throughout the story, Zainab is often perceived as a type of unfathomable mystery to Jaglani. She is someone he constantly struggles to understand. It is precisely due to this mysterious element in Zainab’s character that Jaglani despite being an old married man who is respected in his society, cannot help but be drawn to her the way a sailor is drawn to a Siren. However, Jaglani’s attraction towards Zainab did not form naturally or out of thin air. Though the snowballing of Jaglani’s feelings in the later parts of the story are mostly his own doing, what gets the ball rolling in the beginning of their interactions is Zainab’s masterful control over playing both “the angel in the house” and the “monster” (Gilbert and Gubar 17) in a push and pull game that ultimately drives Jaglani over the edge.

There’s a famous proverb which states that, “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach”. In many ways the image of the obedient wife, cooking the most complex delicacies without complaint for her husband is perhaps the perfect embodiment of an “angel in the house”. When Jaglani first meets Zainab, this is the exact image she places in front of him. Brought into his household as a cook, Zainab’s control of Jaglani begins at his stomach. As Mueenuddin writes, “When she brought the food, four or five small dishes of curry on a steel tray, with the

parathas in a woven reed basket covered with a napkin, he looked up at her suddenly, wanting to find out what kind of woman she might be.” (52). The act of the angel continues for several weeks more. From controlling his stomach, Zainab next takes his arms and legs as afternoon massages soon too became a regular part of their daily routine. It did not take long after this for Jaglani to cut the growing tension between them by making the first move. As their relationship entered the territory of sex, his pen was now hers for the taking and it was time for the monster to come out of hiding.

Compared to many of Mueenuddin’s other female characters, as we shall later see, Zainab is perhaps the most daring and prolific writer. Her control of Jaglani throughout the story is seamless, only breaking towards the end due to her own overconfidence. Her hot and cold game with Jaglani where she in one instant would give “him whatever he wanted”, and in the other close herself off, is what makes him “lose his inhibitions” (Mueenuddin 53-54). Though she reduces their relationship to mere sex, she never gives him the satisfaction of owning her, often refusing his attempts at giving her money, stating, “You buy me things and then later you’ll think you bought me. I was never for sale” (Mueenuddin 54). Furthermore, by playing on the one-sidedness of their relationship, she feeds his infatuation of her by making sure that he never sees her true self; “After they made love he would stroke her, run his hands over her slender body, tell her how much she meant to him. He never before had said these things to any woman. She did not caress him, and he felt that she herself was not touched in her core.” (Mueenuddin 55). What makes Zainab stand out as a writer is her ability to play the long game. She never caves in the face of money offered upfront and in due time is able to bring Jaglani to his knees, begging for her to marry him and ask of him whatever she desires.

It is clear by now that Zainab is not a writer that plans as she goes. She unfolds her plot while keeping a bigger picture in mind. Thus, when Jaglani comes to her ready to give her whatever she desires, she does not ask for money or property. Instead she asks for what only a true writer in her position would, a pen in human form, a child. Had fate been kind to Zainab, perhaps this could be the building blocks to her finally getting control over her narrative. Unfortunately, when her mind is at its strongest, Zainab's body finds itself unable to keep up. It is revealed that Zainab can never have a child of her own. This leads to a mental breakdown that makes Zainab break character, and her spell on Jaglani slowly breaks. Unable to biologically produce children, Zainab asks Jaglani to give her one of his son's daughters. At this point, Jaglani is still under Zainab's control, to the extent that he follows up on this extreme request by forcing his son, Shabir to give up his youngest daughter to Zainab. However, as Zainab's motherly instincts challenge and beat down the "masculinity" of her agency as a writer, her persona that Jaglani had become infatuated with wears off and Jaglani slowly starts reading between the lines. As Zainab settles into the role of a mother, Jaglani begins to resent her and takes back the pen that had been stolen from him. He returns to his first wife, and by the time the story ends, Jaglani find himself "renouncing Zainab" (Mueenuddin 72), resulting in him leaving nothing for her in his will and her having to return to the streets upon his death. Zainab's story sheds light on the importance of writing as an act of survival. Just like a woman writer must write to cope with an "invincible sense of her own autonomy" (Gilbert and Gubar 16), women like Zainab must keep selling stories to escape utter victimhood and write as much of her own narrative as she is able to.

"In Other Rooms, Other Wonders" despite following a similar plot is far less sexual in its narration. Unlike Zainab, the story of this affair is told from the perspective of Husna, a young

girl who tries to seduce her distant uncle and employer, K.K. Harouni to elevate her socioeconomic status. Compared to Zainab, Husna is far younger and less experienced, which is reflected in her attempts at forging a relationship with the divorced landlord, K.K Harouni. Both Harouni and Jaglani were old men who in the final years of their lives felt hollow in their loveless marriages which they had been forced into by their families at a young age. Taking advantage of this loneliness, the main women of the stories present themselves as the missing piece that would fill the emptiness in these men's lives. As a more experienced writer, Zainab is able to do this by slowly slithering her way into Jaglani's life. As a less experienced, young and naïve writer, Husna lacks the effortless boldness of Zainab, and thus even though she is able to exercise some degrees of control over Harouni, it is mostly due to his desire to be controlled rather than her ability to manipulate him. In this instance, in the loneliness of old age, Harouni willingly gives up his pen to Husna knowing that she is far too young and inexperienced to write anything meaningful before the pen runs out of ink.

As I previously mentioned, Zainab is the type of writer who plans ahead and has precise plans of how her plot is going to unfold. Her secret to doing this is having a strong sense of self that could never be touched by the men she is with. Husna on the other hand finds herself crumbling under the weight of Harouni's pen. Though he has given it to her willingly, she lacks the wisdom to know what to write, asking Harouni for simple favors such as being able to live in his house, read in his library, play cards etc. As Harouni himself tells his daughter Sarwat when she confronts him about his affair with Husna and how she is using him:

‘And I'm lonely, Sarwat. You're in Karachi, Kamila is in New York, and Rehana has barely spoken to me in ten years. My friends are dying off or don't go out anymore. She keeps me company. She's no genius, if you like, but she can play cards and so on. Why

don't you spend more time in Lahore? You have a lovely house here, friends here. I would much prefer to see you than her, but you're not available' (Mueenuddin 101)

Husna's inability to succumb to stereotypes that are expected of women in the world she lives in, keeps her from gaining the trust of those she wishes to deceive. As Mueenuddin writes of her, "she had always inhabited an indefinite space, neither rich nor poor, neither servant nor begum, in a city where the very concept of a middle class still found expression only in a few households..." (95). It is due to this precariousness of her position that she lacks the steel focus required to write using a man's pen. Even when it came to the sexual aspect of her and Harouni's relationship, Husna finds herself constantly wavering, unsure of what it is that she wants:

Of course she was a virgin, and that touched him. Letting him do exactly as he wanted, she wore a look in her eyes that he misunderstood as surprise and shyness, and later identified with moods that verged on madness – sequences of perplexity and focus in her eyes, expressing a hooded rage to get what she wanted. She had expected this to be as simple as the signing of a check, a payment. Instead, for a moment the romantic girl awoke, one who would have accepted another man, a man her own age, from her own station... The moment with K. K. meant a great deal to her, but not in the way that he understood it – without meaning to, she had given herself completely. (Mueenuddin 98-99).

The main difference between Zainab and Husna as writers of their own narratives is the ability to plan ahead and knowing what to expect. Having come to terms with the patriarchal nature of the world, Zainab knew that to be a writer in a man's world she must kill the woman inside her. A way she does this is by killing off the desire for sexual pleasure, and letting sex become a

weapon she uses to control men. Husna, despite her ambition is a woman writer in a man's world. Though she is still able to write, she ends up losing herself in the man's narrative and can only write within the borders he has drawn for her. In some ways what Husna suffers from can be described as the "anxiety of authorship" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Being middle class, Husna lacks the exposure to manipulation that Zainab and Saleema have as women of the lowest economic class seeing other women having to do whatever is necessary to rise up the economic ladder. Husna is mostly familiar with upper class women who are often born into money and do not have to struggle to write the same way she does. With mostly male models to look up to, Husna possesses "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her." (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Keeping in line with Bloom's oedipal theme is the male writer's "anxiety of influence", she cannot like a male writer, overthrow her precursor with mere brute force. Since her battle is not with a male precursor but a male precursor's perception of her, "she must redefine the terms of her socialization" (Gilbert and Gubar 49) in order to write. As a woman writer, her attacks must be sneaky and sensual which can easily get complicated as seen in the story through Husna's struggles with her desire to on one hand overthrow Harouni but on the other, to give herself up to him completely.

When K.K. Harouni dies at the end of the story, Husna is kicked out of his house empty handed by his daughters. The power imbalances between Husna and Harouni's daughters despite them all being women, shows how money plays an essential role in women being able to exercise their agency on their own terms. Though Harouni's daughters too must face difficulties in claiming their narratives in a patriarchal world, having money means they do not need to shed their womanhood to write, the way Zainab and Husna must. Unlike Jaglani, Harouni felt no

anger or resent towards the woman who attempted to manipulate him. The lack of financial support left to Husna by Harouni did not stem from a place of indifference rather than hatred. Thus, whereas Zainab's ultimate failure is a result of her inability to keep her act up, Husna fails because she was not able to sell her act in the first place.

Similar to Husna, Saleema, from "Saleema" also suffers due to her inability to sell her story. Saleema had a troubled childhood with a mother who was a prostitute and a father who was a drug addict. She got married off at fourteen after which she moved to Lahore and in ten years' time became a servant at the house of K.K. Harouni. At the beginning of the story Saleema is described as someone who despite her miseries thrives in chaos. As Mueenuddin writes, her difficult life and experiences "had not cracked her hard skin, but made her sensual, unscrupulous – and romantic." (22). Unlike Husna and Zainab her desire to write and control comes from a place joy and fun rather than only survival. This is reflected in the types of men she has affairs with. Unlike Husna and Zainab, Saleema does not go for the head of the household or a rich land owner. She instead finds joy in the smaller things, such as sleeping with the cook and having all the food in the house be made according to her palate; "Hassan gave her – the best parts, things that should have gone to the table... The entire household, from the Sahib on down, had been eating to suit her appetite." (Mueenuddin 23). In some sense, despite not having much money or power, at the beginning of the story, Saleema is a blossoming writer with many short stories rather than a large magnum opus.

What causes Saleema's downfall is her relationship with Rafik, the Harouni family's valet who has worked with them for over fifty years. When Saleema approaches Rafik, she is battling loneliness more than anything else. Though she does still expect certain privileges to come out of sleeping with a much older and financially stable employee of the Harouni

household, she is drawn to him because he shows her kindness. Coming at her opponent in a vulnerable state, Saleema loses herself in the relationship, and even with the added privileges that come with the financial support Rafik provides to her, she forgets her identity as a writer and becomes as much a pawn in Rafik's game as she intended for him to be in hers.

Rafik despite being far richer than Saleema, is still a servant and member of the lower class. This may be one of the reasons why his senses are much sharper than that of Jaglani and Harouni. Though he entertains Saleema's sexual advances, he is much more cautious of allowing her to emotionally manipulate him, at times even pitying the young girl's naivety, stating "You're the strange one, following this old man around like a little sheep. Most shepherds are young boys." (Mueenuddin 35). Saleema's fall as a writer comes not only because she is not able to sell a story, but because she buys a story she cannot afford. As Mueenuddin writes, "Her thoughts were racing, from idea to idea. Oh would he marry her, and she knew he wouldn't. She had been taken by so many men; could have given herself to him so much more pure." (37). Saleema's fantasies of a potential life with Rafik drive her to a point of delusion, making her go as far as to having his child, thinking it might eternally bind him to her. What snaps her out of this fantasy is the return of Rafik's wife who has come back to him wanting to make things work. Unable to control a man who is already being controlled by another woman, Saleema loses her place in Rafik's life. And when K.K. Harouni dies, and she along with many of the younger servants are laid off, she loses even the little agency she had at the beginning of the story. Losing not just her pen but also her spirit as a writer, Saleema meets her end as a drug addict, struggling to make ends meet for her and Allah Baksh, her son with Rafik.

"Provide, Provide", "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders", and "Saleema" are exemplary of the type of struggles woman writers have to face in trying to write in a man's world. Without a

literary tradition of their own, these women must find a way of writing their own stories while still adhering to the stereotypes and literary traditions set forth by men. This is why the inevitable failure of the three women in the stories come not due to a lack of creativity or intellect, but due to their lack of money and power for which they forced to take on a masculine voice all while having to cope with the hurdles and oppression that come with being a woman in Pakistan.

3.2 The Anxiety of Penmanship

The previous section of this chapter looked at women attempting to gain access to a pen by sleeping with men who can provide them with and power and through whom they can vicariously write. The women I shall investigate in this section of the chapter are established writers who have worked their way to the top and act as matriarchs of the family. To do this I will be looking into the female characters in the short stories, “About a Burning Girl” and “Our Lady of Paris” to show what women are capable of once they have achieved money and power.

“About a Burning Girl” tells the story of a woman who was burned alive after she and her husband stole money from their neighbors. The story is a murder mystery told from the perspective of a corrupt judge trying to figure out whether the woman had committed suicide or been murdered. However, that is not the aspect of the story I will be focusing on. Instead what I would like to draw attention to is a minor but impactful character, the judge’s wife, who the judge himself describes as a “poor man’s Lady Macbeth” (Mueenuddin 81). Even only a few pages into the story it is not difficult to understand why Mueenuddin compares this woman to Shakespeare’s iconic Lady Macbeth, a character that perhaps defines the archetype of a complex villainess with ‘monstrous autonomy’. Though the character herself is never named in the story, the way the judge speaks of her throughout the story makes it clear that she is the one who holds

the pen in their relationship. Furthermore, the story's placement of the two female characters in two extreme opposing positions, with one being the slaughtered sheep of her family and the other being the matriarch of hers' brings to light how essential money is in the role a woman plays in her family.

Both of the women in the story are uncared for in their respective homes. However, whereas the 'burning girl' is viewed more as a burden by her husband and in-laws, who want to get rid of her so that they do not have to give her a share of the money she helped them steal, the judge's wife is someone who is feared and respected even if she is not loved. Her contributions as a writer is something that even the judge himself comes to acknowledge, knowing that much like Macbeth, he would never have gotten to place he is had it not been for his wife's masterful plotting. As the judge himself states, "My wife, to put it in the clearest terms, is a shrew. She quite truthfully insists that without her I would still be a lawyer without briefs, roaming the courts looking for clients, or clamoring at the bar and groveling at the feet of judges whose greatest ambition, when they wake each morning, is to sell themselves for a good price." (Mueenuddin 76). The judge's wife's control over his life is seen in small details throughout the entire story. Everything from the house they live in to the servants they work with, are all done on the wife's terms. And though the judge himself speaks ill of his wife in his own thoughts, these are never sentiments he has the courage to voice out loud. Rather, he obediently obeys whatever she tells him to do, even asking his servants to ask for his wife's permission instead of his on when they want a few days off work. The most apparent example of the power dynamic of the relationship between the judge and his wife is noticed in a scene where the judge grudgingly gets ready to go to work in the morning while his wife lays in bed planning the day ahead. As Mueenuddin writes, "Shaved and showered, glistening, as I like to think of myself, I paid my

respects to my wife, who lies in bed each morning, sipping tea and planning operations for the day ahead, and then proceeded out into the verandah where the car stood in the cool gloom” (78). Mueenuddin’s use of the word “operations” here serves a deeper purpose. The image of the husband going to work while the wife stays back home is another stereotypical image that is usually associated with gender roles where the man goes out to earn money while the woman stays at home doing frivolous house work and tidying herself up before her husband returns home. It would be very easy to read this scene as one that boxes in the judge as the working man and his wife and the ditzy housewife. By stating that the wife is “planning operations”, Mueenuddin instead subtly adds more weight to the type of work the wife does that draws attention to the more authoritative role she plays in the house. Viewing the wife as a writer, more specifically, allows this scene to be interpreted as one where the female has gained full control over the pen and is now in charge not only of her own narrative but her husband’s as well.

Another matriarch and seasoned woman writer among Mueenuddin’s female characters is Rafia from “Our Lady in Paris”, a story that depicts Sohail, a Pakistani man introducing his American girlfriend Helen to his parents. Rafia, Sohail’s mother is the matriarch of the family and has reached a position where she controls the actions of both her husband and her child. In the previous section I spoke of how in a world where women cannot have a pen of her own, she must steal a man’s pen to write her own story. In “Our Lady of Paris” Rafia has reached a position in her family where she has not only successfully stolen the man’s pen, but also given it a human form in the shape of a child. Sohail, regardless of whether or not he is aware of it is Rafia’s greatest tool in controlling her husband. This can be seen in the opening scene of the story when Rafia asks Sohail to convince his father to go to Paris; “Sohail I’d like to ask for a favor...I want your father to take a vacation, he’s pushing himself too hard. He’s always bored in

London. I thought we might come to Paris.” (Mueenuddin 111). This controlling of Sohail is not just limited to controlling her husband. As the heir to his father’s property, controlling Sohail also gives Rafia access to the power that her husband will ultimately be passing down to their son. This is perhaps the main reason she is cautious of who her son dates and who she may potentially be passing her carefully crafted pen on to, I the start of a new literary tradition.

Rafia’s competency as writer can easily be vouched for seeing how easily she controls the men in her life. As a person with both money and privacy, Rafia is free to write in ways that most other women, particularly those of the lower class, cannot. It is due to the position she has reached that she can now start to create a feminine literary tradition that can stand opposing the already established and powerful literary tradition of men. Though not blatantly obvious on the surface level, “Our Lady of Paris” in many ways is about the passing on of tradition and values. For men, the values passed down are rooted in tradition and come with the burden of living up to one’s family name. In many ways it resembles Bloom’s theory on the “anxiety of influence”, a fear among male writers that “he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings” (Gilbert and Gubar 47). As Sohail’s father, Mr. Harouni (cousin of K.K. Harouni) states about his own grief over his family lineage:

You know or you correctly assume that I was born into a comfortably well-off family. All my life I’ve been lucky, my business succeeded, I’ve had no tragedies, my wife and I are happy, we have a wonderful son. The one thing I’ve missed, I sometimes feel, is the sensation of being absolutely free, to do exactly what I like, to go where I like, to act as I like. I suspect that only an American ever feels that. You aren’t weighed down by your families, and you aren’t weighed down by history. If I ran away to the South Pole some

Pakistani businessman would one day crawl into my igloo and ask if I was the cousin of K. K. Harouni.’ (Mueenuddin 116).

As Gilbert and Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Bloom’s conception of the “anxiety of influence” is exclusionist as it does not account for the experiences of female authors who do not have precursors to be influenced by. What women experience according to Gilbert and Gubar, is the “anxiety of authorship”, something characters such as Husna experiences, as I have explained in the previous section of this chapter. The “anxiety of authorship” is the fear in female writers that she cannot create or write or become a precursor herself. However, the stories of the women in “Our Lady of Paris” is not simply reduced to a female writer’s fear of writing. Instead, we now take a step beyond the “anxiety of authorship” to then witness the beginning of a female literary tradition between Rafia and Helen. The highlight of “Our Lady in Paris” is a scene between Rafia and Helen where Rafia calls Helen to meet in private and seemingly discourages or warns her of the responsibilities that may come with marrying her son Sohail. In a South-Asian context, it is easy to view this scene merely as a vicious interaction between two women where the overbearing mother-in-law digs down on her potential daughter-in-law. However, viewing this scene as an exchange between two female writers allows an interpretation where the competitive tension takes a back seat and the conversation can instead be read as the formation of a sisterhood stemming from a deep understanding of each other’s struggles.

The exchange between Rafia and Helen takes place in a café and from the description of Rafia’s clothes at the start of the scene, it is understood that she is not putting on the same disguise that she normally has in front of her husband and son. Throughout the story, Rfaia is seen wearing traditional clothing, typically Saris. In this particular scene however, as Mueenuddin writes, “Rafia wore Western clothes – tailored brown slacks, brown high-heeled

boots, and a white cashmere sweater with a thick turtleneck – which surprised Helen, this collected, hip look.” (123). Rafia’s traditional Pakistani clothing symbolized the role she expected to play in society as a Pakistani woman. Her change of attire in her meeting with Helen represents the killing of her “aesthetic ideal” (Gilbert and Gubar 17) and presenting a version of herself that is free from the male perception of her. As the conversation commences, Rafia goes on to talk about Helen’s relationship with Sohail. Though in some ways Rafia does discourage Helen in saying that she does not think her relationship with Sohail will last, it is more out of respect for Helen and knowing what she might have to give up by marrying into a Pakistani family, rather than thinking no woman is good enough for her son. As Rafia herself says, “I also wanted to have a real moment with you. Quite aside from Sohail, I respect you, and I envy your freedoms. In your life you’ll have solid things, and you’ll have them more solidly than I did.” (Mueenuddin 123). The respect of course is mutual in this scene and Helen being a younger woman and someone from a different culture can only marvel at the way a precursor like Rafia carries herself; “Watching her, struggling to keep up with her, Helen marveled at how quickly Rafia could transform herself.” (Mueenuddin 123). As Rafia goes into further detail of why she thinks Helen and Sohail will not be able to make each other happy, she is met with resistance from Helen who is adamant that she can make her relationship work. Though Rafia does not approve of their relationship, she does not ask Helen to break up with her son, nor does she push further to change Helen’s mind. As their meeting comes to an end, Helen thanks Rafia for all that she has taught Sohail, almost as if thanking her for the pen that Rafia is now passing on to her; “I guess I just wanted to thank you for making Sohail what he is. He’s been everything to me, he’s been good to me. I think a lot of the things that he showed me, you showed him first. Just his way of looking at things, I mean, the good part of it. And books and pictures.” (Mueenuddin

125). To this Rafia responds, in words that cannot strictly be seen as acceptance nor rejection, “I can’t decide if those are or aren’t the words of a future daughter-in-law. There’s something valedictory about them” (Mueenuddin 125). Thus, a literary tradition is born, with Rafia as a precursor and Helen as the aspiring new poetess who simultaneously wishes to prove Rafia wrong and pay respect to all Rafia has achieved as a writer who paved the way.

“About a Burning Girl” and “Our Lady of Paris” are a testament to what women are able to achieve when they have the resources to exercise their agency and claim their own narratives. Not only can she steal back her narrative from men who imprison her into stereotypical female roles, she can also use the stereotypes created by men against them, by using the man’s pen to write his narrative in a way that better benefits her.

Chapter Four

An Attic of One's Own

The second essential for a female fiction writer according to Virginia Woolf is a “room of one's own”. Over the years, due to the popularity of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the phrase has come to signify various things regarding female emancipation and empowerment. However, in the context of the actual text, what Woolf refers to when she states that a female writer must have “a room of her own” (7) is privacy; time alone during which a writer may think and write without interruption. Aside from money, privacy is also something that most women of Woolf's time did not have the luxury of receiving. As Woolf states herself, “In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble...Since her pin money, which depended on the goodwill of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed, she was debarred from such alleviations...” (58). Because women were only valued based on their relationship to men, they scarcely received the luxury of reflecting on their lives and desires without being whisked away to perform their social duties. This lack of privacy is also something that is reflected in women's writing. Since physical conditions play such a huge role in a writer's ability to produce literature, “The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be.” (Woolf 85).

The connection between literature and privacy has been a topic of discussion in several feminist texts. Gilbert and Gubar for instance take Woolf's notion of privacy and space further to

comment not only on how women historically have not been allowed spaces of their own, but rather have had their privacy intruded upon by the male literary tradition that confine women into the radicalized positions of angels and monsters. Borrowing Joan Didion's argument, they present writing as an aggressive act because it is "an imposition...an invasion of someone else's most private space" (Gilbert and Gubar 20). The issue thus ventures from the physical world to that of the metaphysical too, as what women struggle with is not just being excluded from the male dominated literary tradition, but from being unable to escape the narratives male writers have confined them to, and writing about their experiences in their own terms. This sentiment is also something that Woolf has reflected on in her work, as Salvaggio states, "Virginia Woolf would seem to have had this idea in mind when she considered "how unpleasant it is to be locked out" and yet "how it is worse perhaps to be locked in."" (274).

In *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* women's positions in society greatly impacts their conception of privacy and space. This in turn influences to what degree they are able to exercise their agency and write their own narratives. In this chapter I will be examining how women's relationship with men and the extents to which her privacy is intruded interferes with her ability to write. In the first section I will be looking at physical privacy and how invasion upon women's space and bodies impacts her ability to write. Following this, in the second section I will direct the conversation to the invasion of mental privacy to discuss how the patriarchy and gender roles can affect a woman's ability to think or write about herself.

4.1 'Room' to Reflect

Women's lack of physical privacy is a common element in Mueenuddin's short stories. Many of his female characters are of the lower class or are servants which means they often lack

the resources to afford a room of their own. In relation particularly to the stories I discussed in the first section of the last chapter, this lack of privacy or room to reflect on their thoughts may be a reason why characters such as Husna and Saleema end up losing themselves in their relationships and why characters such as Zainab can only portray herself using archetypes that have been written by men. Physical invasions of privacy of a woman's space and body can influence how they perceive the world and how they choose to write their stories. However, this process of influence is not always as direct as one may think and can vary depending on socioeconomic and cultural context. In this section I will be using the stories "A Spoiled Man" and "Nawabdin Electrician" to discuss the correlation of privacy and writing in light of the Pakistani economic and social systems depicted by Mueenuddin. Additionally, I will also be exploring how this invasion of privacy is not just fixated on how much space a woman has but if she has a say in how her space gets used.

"A Spoiled Man" depicts the story of Rezak, an old man who gets hired as a new servant at Sohail Harouni's house. The story involves two minor but memorable female characters, Sonya, Sohail Harouni's American wife, who took an interest in Rezak out of boredom and pity, and Rezak's wife, a mentally challenged young girl who Rezak married in his old age after getting hired by the Harouni household. The conceptions of space and agency with regards to these two women are complex and often goes against the grain of what Woolf has stated about the relationship between privacy and money. While Sonya has the economic resources to afford her own space, her social position constantly gets in the way of her privacy. On the other hand, Rezak's wife lacks any substantial physical space, yet her lack of social standing allows her to make her escape, something that Sonya is not able to do.

In the story “Our Lady of Paris”, as discussed in the previous chapter, we see Sohail Harouni’s mother warn his then girlfriend, Helen, about the pressures of marrying into a Pakistani family. Now years later, in “A Spoiled Man”, Sohail Harouni is seen with a different American woman, Sonya, who now has to live out the hardships that Shohail’s mother had previously warned Helen about. In the beginning of the story, it is revealed that though Sonya Harouni has readily accepted the task of assimilating into Pakistani culture, going as far as to learn Urdu and wear Pakistani clothing. However, despite this, every now and then she gets into arguments with her husband about not being able to fully adjust to Pakistani culture. As Mueenuddin writes, “And yet, though she insisted that she loved Pakistan, sometimes it all became too much. ‘I hate it, everyone’s a crook, nothing works here!’ she would sob, fighting with her husband. Then she would storm out to her car and retreat to the Kalapani house, forty minutes away, arriving unannounced, withdrawing darkly into the master bedroom...” (177). As a member of the esteemed Harouni household, Sonya has the privilege of getting away from her problems and briefly running into a private room where she can reflect. However, her reflection is never able to come completion as not long after she retreats into her private space, “Her husband would drive up to spend the night with her, bringing their little son as a pledge of their love, and they would make peace.” (Mueenuddin 177). Being the daughter-in-law of an esteemed household, Sonya’s social obligation to keep up appearances impacts her ability to take the time to fully process her feelings and come up with the narrative she would like her life to follow. As a result of this occurrence, Sonya lives in a state of limbo where due to the book having to “be adapted to the body” (Woolf 85), she is able to exercise her agency in small doses instead of being able to change the direction of her narrative.

In contrast to Sonya, whose money and social identity are the primary invaders of her private space and thus her ability to write, Rezak's wife is in the precarious position where the invasion of privacy is what allows her the opportunity to claim her narrative. This nameless character who is only addressed in the story in relation to her husband, makes her appearance when her parents sell her off to Rezak, who in light of his economic upscale by becoming a servant at the Harouni house, finds himself in want of a wife who will bear him children. Though the girl is described to have certain speech impediments and "not be right in the head" (Mueenuddin 181), Rezak finds use for her upon learning she knows how to cook. Initially the girl is reluctant to be in the marriage, leading Rezak "to lock her in the hut" (Mueenuddin 182) to prevent her from running after her father. However, much like Woolf, Rezak's wife too finds that it is perhaps better to be locked out than in, and soon begins opening herself up to Rezak. As Mueenuddin writes:

Gradually, she became accustomed to living with him. He let her roam as she wanted, once he saw that she would not run away... He let her sleep in the stone hut, until one night, as he was watching television in his cubicle, she cautiously lifted the door flap, stood absorbing the lit red chamber for a moment, and then nimbly leaped in, eyes fixed on the television. After that, she always slept with him (182).

From the reading of her surroundings, it is easy to assume that Rezak's wife lacks the privacy that Sonya has. However, unlike Sonya, Rezak's wife is not forced out of her contemplation due to her husband's pandering or her social obligations. Even though she had been forced into the hut by Rezak, the decision to come out was entirely her own. This is perhaps why Rezak's wife is able to think her plot through and make a proper escape when many of the other female characters of Mueenuddin's story are not able to do the same. The difference between Sonya and

Rezak's wife is that while Sonya has her privacy invaded against her will, Rezak's wife invites the invasion of her private space and body as a way of gaining Rezak's trust. It is only after Rezak has intruded enough of her space to believe she has nothing else to hide from him, that his wife pulls a narrative twist that changes the course of her life. One evening as Rezak returns to his hut one evening, he finds that his wife is no longer there; "Returning to his hut at dusk after one of these excursions, he found that the fire had burned out in the hearth and his wife was gone. The goats too were missing, although she should have brought them in by this time." (Mueenuddin 183).

Like Rezak's wife, Nawabdin's wife from "Nawabdin Electrician" is also a woman of the lower class who has a complex relationship binding her privacy and identity as a writer together. Being a mother to thirteen children, it is difficult to imagine any notion of privacy this woman may have. Unlike most of the couples in Mueenuddin's stories, Nawabdin and his wife appear to be a pair who truly love and care for each other. Due to this, it is difficult to find instances where Nawabdin's wife has to scheme or plot to exercise her agency. One may say that Nawabdin's wife has closed her pen after finding her happily ever after with the man she loves. However, bringing in the notion of privacy as an essential component to a woman's ability to write fiction, it may also be argued that Nawabdin's wife has become so consumed in her role as a mother and a wife that she lacks the room to reflect on her life and find what it is she wants to write about. As Takashi writes with regards to Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*:

women have long been forbidden to explore beyond the limitation of boundaries pre-established by their fathers, brothers, or sons. All the while, their bodies as well as their rooms have been governed and silenced by the patriarchal authority. It is in this way that

most daughters and wives have been unduly misguided into neglecting their own bodies, never mind abandoning the attempt to represent their bodies as texts (4).

It is revealed early in the story that Nawabdin's wife had given birth to twelve girls before Nawabdin finally got his "looked-for son" (Mueenuddin 10). Whether the pressure to bear a son came from Nawabdin himself or the patriarchal Pakistani society that deems sons more valuable than daughters, the birthing of so many children has undoubtedly impacted Nawabdin's wife's conception of privacy. This lack of privacy and thereby lack of an identity as a writer is reflected in the story, firstly by this character's lack of a name, and secondly, by the several scenes throughout the story that depict Nawabdin's wife working to fulfill the needs of her husband and children.

Unlike what Woolf has observed about the correlation of space and money, the hierarchy of social positions in Pakistani society depict a more complex relationship between economy and privacy. Thus, in the world of *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, I would argue that a woman's conception of physical space is not centered around how much space she actually has, but rather whether she has the agency to use that space to her liking.

4.2 Mapping Out Madness

In the previous section I discussed the importance of physical privacy in a writer's creative process. In this section, I shall be directing the conversation to a metaphysical space to discuss how the overwhelming presence of the male literary tradition and how they depict women in their writings can invade a woman's mental privacy and interfere with how she perceives and therefore writes about herself. To demonstrate my point, I will be using the short

story “Lily”, which depicts the story of a woman who unknowingly traps herself into a marriage that she does not want to be in due to societal pressures regarding how a woman should behave.

At the very beginning of “Lily”, the story presents the titular character as a typical spoilt rich girl who attends “parties all week, month, endlessly, drinking, rarely having dinner.” (Mueenuddin 131). Though her parents do not approve of how she lives her life, they do not stop her from doing what she wants to do. From this initial description it would be easy to assume that Lily has access to both money and privacy and therefore should be able write her narrative however she pleases. Though this is partially true, as the story goes on, Lily is seen letting go of her party-animal life style and trying to force herself into the role of an ideal house wife. On the surface this decision may seem like an act of maturity or growing up. However, Lily’s dissatisfaction at how her life turns out after her marriage suggests that there may be more to the story than what meets the eye. Lily may have had the physical necessities required to live an emancipated life. However, as someone who lives in a highly patriarchal society her mental privacy is not something that can be bought with money the same way physical privacy can. And it is this very lack of mental privacy that Lily must overcome if she is to write her story on her own terms.

Though Lily is shown enjoying her life of endless drinking and meaningless sex in the beginning of the story, there are small windows of time every now and then where the guilt of living her life how she desires in a society that actively forbids it catches up to her. For instance, in a scene following a near death experience in a car crash, Lily is seen looking back at her actions and thinking of them as something that requires forgiveness. As Mueenuddin writes:

It seemed to her that the jet falling away was her past, and that she had been forgiven, believing it with all the intensity of the dream, like the intensity and purity of love in a dream. She would forgive herself, for the wrongs she had done and the wrongs done to her, the pain she had caused her parents, who maintained the proprieties on her father's Burma Shell pension, forgive herself for money she had thrown away, the men she had slept with, refusing intimacy, imagining there would be no cost. (133).

Lily's train of thought reveals the internalized misogyny that lingers in the back of her otherwise very liberal lifestyle. The idea of forgiveness in particular brings to light the guilt she feels for living a life that is so staggeringly different from what is expected of a woman in Pakistan. The guilt Lily feels over actions is a sign of an invasion of her mental privacy by the patriarchy and is a stepping stone to the sudden narrative shift that occurs in Lily's life after she meets Murad, a young wealthy man who has recently inherited a large portion of his father's property.

Lily first meets Murad at a party. Their relationship begins with casual flirting and sex but soon takes a serious turn after Murad reveals how he had instantly been mesmerized by Lily the first time he saw her at Sohail Harouni's party, months before they had formally met. To this confession, Lily responds emotional and touched, stating, "That's the nicest story I've ever heard about myself." (Mueenuddin 146). This moment signifies a sudden shift in Lily's mental space. Flattered by the image of herself laid out by Murad, Lily opens up the private room in her mind and turns it into a communal space where her perception of her self is challenged by the presence of Murad's perception of her. As Lily and Murad get married, Lily is seen leaning into the image of herself that Murad had presented to her; a version of herself that is monogamous, pure, and the antithesis of everything she used to be. As Lily herself tells Murad, shortly after their marriage, "I want to be at the farm. I'm going to be like an old-fashioned Punjabi wife, weighing

out the flour and sugar every morning and counting the eggs. And everything locked up, a huge ring of keys on a chain around my waist.” (Mueenuddin 154-155)

Gilbert and Gubar have famously written with reference to Woolf, “Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must “kill” the “angel in the house” ... In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been “killed” into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the “monster” in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity” (17). Lily’s surrender to her aesthetic ideal is the ultimate hurdle in her journey as a writer. In the beginning of the story this surrender takes the form of the guilt she feels simply for living her life the way she pleases. After her marriage to Murad, her perception of herself though still facilitated by patriarchal values, is flipped by her husband. She goes from monster to angel, who despite being opposites, are equally harmful to how Lily views herself.

Drugged by the male perceptions of her though she may be, as the bliss of marriage passes, Lily finds herself wishing she could revert back to her old ways of drinking and partying with her friends. Though Murad does not object to her doing such things directly, the patriarchal voice that has invaded the privacy of her mind prevents her from exercising her free will. As Gilbert and Gubar had similarly stated with regards to the lack of a King in *Snow White*, “he need no longer appear in the story because, having assimilated the meaning of her own sexuality (and having, thus, become the second Queen) the woman has internalized the King’s rules: his voice resides now in her own mirror, her own mind.” (38). Murad’s authority at this point in the story has become to an extent irrelevant. Lily herself has allowed her mental privacy to be invaded by the male construction of women to such a degree that she can only write about

herself using the man's language. Thus, even when she exercises any form of free will, she cannot do so without being overwhelmed by guilt.

Eventually Lily cracks under the pressure of living up to male expectations; "She saw that now the plans must be renegotiated, reconceived. She had believed that her personality would be subsumed in their larger personality as a couple, living into each other, but already the strangeness of the initial engagement wore off and she went back to being – exactly – herself." (Mueenuddin 159). Unable to find happiness in her marriage, she ends up cheating on Murad after getting drunk with her friends in her own house. However, when she confronts Murad about this, he sees her unfulfillment in their marriage not as a site of unhappiness but one of immaturity. At this point it may be wise to compare the mental privacy accessible to both Murad and Lily as men and women in a patriarchy. Throughout the story, Murad is frequently seen writing in a journal, which contains all his private thoughts. As he says to Lily, "You wouldn't, I know, but I'll say it. Don't read this. I need one place where I can put down whatever's on my mind, things that I don't even mean." (Mueenuddin 167). However, when curiosity gets the best of Lily, she opens up Murad's diary to invade his private space for a change. In the diary amidst pages of paragraphs she finds written, "I won't ever again be made to run away from my own house. We agreed to live decently and honorably and in peace. She says she wants all that, but I don't think she knows how – to live in peace. For her, chaos and willfulness are the same as independence, the way to a vivid life." (Mueenuddin 167).

Murad's diary exposes the stark difference between male and female privacy in a patriarchal setting. Whereas Lily, despite her free-spirited nature finds herself constantly fighting the patriarchy's claim over her mental perception of herself, Murad is so confident in a 'room of his own' that he does not even flinch at the idea of being changed or challenged by Lily's role in

his life. This luxury of privacy is precisely what allows men to be effortless writers, easily able to take control of their lives, while women even with money and physical privacy, continuously must struggle to protect their mental privacy from deeply ingrained patriarchal values. Though Lily, by the end of the story, is able to find a sense of self and finally stake claim to her narrative by identifying “Among all possible futures...the one she must avoid” (Mueenuddin 172), the constant struggle she had to go through to claim authorship over her narrative, especially in contrast to the ease with which Murad does the same, is a testament to the many hurdles women must pass to be able to see themselves outside of the construct that has been built for them by men.

Chapter Five

Conclusion: A Feminism from Within

In her paper, “Intimate Critique: Toward a Feminism from Within”, Dr. Kahnum Shaikh proposes a new way of thinking about South Asian feminism. With the introduction of a framework she calls the “intimate critique”, Shaikh states that it is at the intersection of her familial oppression and her internal liberal desire to combat said oppressions that her feminist politics was formed. Thus, to engage with South Asian feminism, it is not enough to merely attack patriarchal structures using ideas of gender and oppression that adhere to a more western narrative. Instead, one must look towards a feminism within, which can critique patriarchal structures that oppress women while still acknowledging the nuances and individuality of the experiences of the women that reside in those patriarchies.

The origins of a feminist resistance towards the patriarchy forming while still adhering to certain patriarchal values is the foundation upon which my thesis has been built. I stated at the beginning of my paper that most of the existing literature of Mueenuddin’s work viewed the women of his stories as absolute victims. As I ventured deeper into this literature for my thesis, I found that the reason for this narrative of victimhood could be traced back to an understanding of feminism that is not culturally sensitive to the experiences of non-white women. Sara Ahmed, has famously stated in her book *Living a Feminist Life* that, “It might be assumed that feminism travels from West to East. It might be assumed that feminism is what the West gives to the East. That assumption is a traveling assumption, one that tells a feminist story in a certain way, a story that is much repeated; a history of how feminism acquired utility as an imperial gift” (4). It is

this assumption exactly that would have many abject the women of Mueenuddin's story to a state of absolute victimhood by glossing over the subtle ways in which women exercise their agency.

Going back to Shaikh, there is one particular paragraph of her paper that perfectly sums up why I so adamantly insist that Mueenuddin's female characters not be defined by their victimhood. The paragraph in question opens with a conversation between Shaikh and her Khala (maternal-aunt). A conversation in which Shaikh's Khala urges her to be docile and disciplined at her in-law's house so that the image of the 'angel in the house' may hide the writer that lives within. As Shaikh writes:

I asked her why we should suppress our desires and subsume what we expected from our lives, privileging what our future husbands and their families would want us to be: "What about us, Khala? What about what we want?" She responded forcefully, answer ready, explaining that the goal was not to dissolve your sense of self, your "I," but to tuck it away temporarily while you scan the terrains of power you are traversing. "Tie it up in your duppatta's pulloo and let it hang next to your body for a few years. Once you have understood the mahol, made your place in the in-laws' home and hearts, once you are situated and secure, then untie the knot in your pulloo and let your 'I' spread. Only then it can spread and flourish." (370).

Shaikh's argument much like my own is grounded in a cultural sensitivity that comes from an understanding of what South Asian societies are like. This understanding gives way to interpretations of stories that look beyond just what that patriarchy does to women and takes into account the formidable efforts made by women to interact with their oppressors and finding ways of letting their 'I' flourish. A feminism from within refuses to be trapped by victim narratives.

Instead it encourages a reading of texts where women in subservient positions are not just looked to be saved, but are acknowledged for the intelligence and bravery with which they battle their oppressors.

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