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Rising Autonomy of Matriarch and Bargaining with Patriarchy: A Feminist Analysis of Haider's *How It Happened*

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the shifting dynamics of female agency, domestic authority, and structural subversion in Shazaf Fatima Haider's novel *How It Happened* (2012) through the theoretical lens of Deniz Kandiyoti's seminal work, *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988). It argues that the absolute domestic autonomy of the matriarch, Dadi Gulbahar Begum is not an expression of authentic feminist empowerment, rather it is the fulfillment of a life-long classical patriarchal bargain. Women endure youth stage subjugation in exchange for late life authority. Using close textual analysis, this paper explores how macro-structural shifts i.e. modern education, urban mobility and companionate ideals of marriage disrupt this generational cycle. The counter strategies of the younger generations focus on radical resistance. Zeba's active subversion of sectarian marriages and traditional vetting process directly attack Dadi's authority. This study demonstrates that Haider's novel reflects the inevitable breakdown of classical patriarchy in contemporary urban Pakistan. Younger characters in the novel do not bargain with patriarchy in a positive way rather they reject patriarchal notions and struggle for their position and autonomy. They force the re-evaluation of how females' autonomy is negotiated, sustained and reclaimed within the contemporary South Asian literature.*

Keywords: *Autonomy, Matriarch, Bargain, Classic Patriarchy*

1. Introduction

In contemporary literature, the works that highlight culture, gender, and power dynamics grab the attention of ever-growing audience. One such notable contribution is Shazaf Fatima Haider's *How It Happened* that is an exploration of highly detailed study of female identity and autonomy within the patriarchal landscape of contemporary South Asia. The narrative deeply weaves personal and societal conflicts, reflecting on struggles of women who seek self-definition in a society prevailed by male dominance. In the novel, Zeba, the protagonist and other characters portray different forms of womanhood and represent their desire for autonomy and traditional expectations.

I am the one you hid

In your walls of stone

While you roamed free as a breeze

Not knowing that my voice cannot

Be smothered by the stones.

(Naheed, 2009, p. 34)

At the heart of the exploration lies the idea of matriarchy and its rising autonomy. We live in a world where traditional gender roles often limit women's place and position in a society, but Shazaf Fatima Haider presents characters who embody resilience and defiance. Through their journeys, the narrative reflects a shift from historically constructed dependence on males, that determine the women's lifestyle. This transition from dependence on male to having autonomy is not only a form of rebellion against patriarchy, instead it represents an underlying and deep negotiation, a bargaining, with the patriarchy that seeks to constrain them. The matriarchs in the novel represent a critical shift from victimhood to empowerment. It embodies a new model of womanhood that redefines power dynamics. Matriarchs reflect a historical consciousness that help in building their choices and wisdom from past struggles inform present actions. This narrative allows women to craft their own identities independent of patriarchal constraints.

In this article we will analyze how different characters in the novel especially Zeba, Dadi, Fatima show dominant perspectives which highlight their rising autonomy of matriarch through the lens of Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," This lens provides a framework about how women negotiate their roles and autonomy in a patriarchal structure. In the novel there are just few instances of male dominance, otherwise females are having dominant authority. This reflects that females living in South Asia especially in Pakistan have power over themselves as well as decision-making capability. Female characters handle societal pressure and demand simultaneously asserting their autonomy. Matriarch refers to a female, an elderly woman who rules a family or a tribe. Dadi is the matriarch of Bandian family who makes all the decisions of the family.

Through a feminist analysis rooted in Kandiyoti's framework, we uncover layers of complexity that characterize women's experiences within *How It Happened*. The matriarchs of the novel are not monolithic and their autonomy is not simply a goal to acquire but a continuous process that is marked by negotiation, adaptation and resistance. This article aims to dive deep into the intricate relationships between the matriarchs and their surroundings in *How It Happened*. This also highlights the agency of matriarchs amidst societal expectations.

Focusing on how traditional roles shift, we will examine how women in the novel assert their identities, resist subjugation, and create a space of power that challenge the patriarchal order. As the characters' stories unfold, we will analyze the deployment of their choices through the lens of bargaining with Patriarchy, where each decision leads to some consequences that not only shapes their own destinies but also shaping narratives of future generation.

In doing so we will address the questions of how rising autonomy among patriarchs show a transition within the patriarchal landscape and waving a reevaluation of women's roles within both familial and societal contexts. By illuminating these dynamics, this article aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on gender in literature, by showing how Haider's *How It Happened* not only reflects societal realities but also inspires a reimagining of women's potential in the quest for autonomy and empowerment.

2. Literature Review

This research fulfils the gap by addressing the issues of rising autonomy of matriarch that support deep patriarchal structures and also the rising autonomy of young generations that subvert classic patriarchy.

Writers, such as Kamala Das and Ismat Chughtai, have prepared the ground for modern writers to discuss multiple facets of the female identity in male-dominated societies. In the current discourse, there has been an increasing fascination with the study of South Asian literature in relation to feminist narratives, which question or expose the prevailing norms of gender roles,

and record the experiences of women. In this regard, the work of Shazaf Fatima Haider is important as it combines both personal narrative and cultural critique.

The history of the feminist movement in South Asia is long and has also been linked with the big social and political movements. This is important to be aware of in order to have an understanding of the current situation of literature, and women's roles in literature. During and after colonial rule, positions and experiences, which significantly influenced literature and society.

The concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy' by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) provides a useful perspective on women's agency in patriarchal settings. Kandiyoti (1988) argues that women negotiate their place in the world of patriarchy and strategically make themselves fit into the norms of the society, at the same time asserting their autonomy. Women live in a range of compliance and resistance, sometimes trying to assert their agency in subtle ways while conforming to some expectations. There is a distinction between the different generations in their experience and reactions to the norms of patriarchy, and they also produce a dialogue between tradition and modernity.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker (1982) or The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985), are the texts where women are seen trying to break down the female connections, but when they are forced to, they are still able to establish connections for care, survival and resistance to the monstrous patriarchal control. The value of women's solidarity becomes evident as women reinforce each other in their fight against the restrictions of patriarchy.

Kumkum Sangari (1993) identifies a central tension in South Asian domestic literature as the multiple and overlapping patriarchies that govern the private sphere. Within this system, elderly women function not as a victim, but as a primary force of imposing patriarchal notions.

Uma Chakravarti (1993) observes in her work on Gendering Caste that the survival of traditional structures depends on women policing other women to maintain lineage purity.

Scholars like Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan (2003) argue that the traditional Indian or Pakistani woman's body is treated as a form of cultural and sectarian currency. In Postcolonial South Asian fiction, the domestic drawing room and the matchmaking rituals colloquially known as the "trolley-of-chai" culture serve as a primary site for evaluating female worth.

Modern South Asian feminist scholars, Saba Mahmood (2005) and Kamla Bhasin (2000), argue that female agency manifests not only through overt, but also through the subtle, everyday reconfiguration of domestic choices. Loved-based marriages in Pakistan represent a significant macro-structural disruption. As modern education and urbanization expand, young women reject the traditional patriarchal bargain.

a. Research Gap and Contribution

The existing body of scholarship on *How It Happened* address how older matriarchs support classic notions of patriarchy and implement domestic authority, but this study analyses how younger female characters like Zeba and Fatima subvert bargaining strategies by showing resistance and resilience. They represent Pakistani women who navigate their individualistic desires without completely serving familial ties.

3. Theoretical Framework

Utilizing Deniz Kandiyoti's *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988) this study analyzes how women especially elderly women strategize and negotiate within oppressive gender systems rather than simply being the passive victims. This study highlights how different patriarchal structures shape women's choices and survival strategies. Most of the Western feminist theories often conceptualize patriarchy as a monolithic and unchanging system of male dominance that renders women entirely passive victims. In contrast, Kandiyoti introduces a dynamic and a structural

paradigm. She argues that women are active agents who rationally negotiate within specific patriarchal constraints to maximize their security and life chances.

Patriarchal Bargain

Kandiyoti defines patriarchal bargain as the set of rules that govern relations between two sexes. These bargains are not permanent but they are historically concrete, context specific and fluid. Within a given gender system, women do not only suffer oppression, but also, they make calculated and strategic choices to manipulate and uphold male authority in exchange for protection, economic safety, and social capital. Thus, what appears from the outside as passive submission or internalized misogyny is often a rational survival strategy.

Mechanics of Classic Patriarchy

Kandiyoti categorizes gender regimes into distinct types, she identifies Classic Patriarchy as a system that is dominant across the patriarchal belt that spans North Africa, Middle East, South Asia and parts of East Asia.

The Extended Patrilocal Household

The structural foundation of classic patriarchy is the multi-generational, patrilocal household. After marriage, a young woman leaves her natal home and enters her husband's family as an outsider. In this household, she is placed at the absolute bottom of the domestic hierarchy. She is under the control of both male kin and senior women i.e. matriarchs.

Temporal Subordination

Classic patriarchy operates on a cyclic timeline. A young woman, especially, a young married woman's early life is defined by deep subordination, hard domestic labor, and a lack of autonomy. However, the system offers her a long-term incentive. If she obeys the rules and bears male heirs, her status will dramatically shift as she ages. When she eventually becomes a mother-in-law, she inherits authority and control over her own daughters-in-law. Thus, women endure temporary oppression because they are invested in the future power the system promises them.

Sons as Social Security

In classic patriarchy, women are denied direct ownership of land, property or independent economic resources. Because her economic survival is entirely tied to male protection, a woman's strategic asset is her son. Bearing and raising sons is not just a cultural preference, instead, it is a vital insurance policy for women. Sons ensure a woman's lifelong security in her husband's home and it protects her from being discarded or divorced.

So, Kandiyoti's framework allows this study to deconstruct agency within constraints, to identify systemic vulnerabilities, which notes that classic patriarchy is highly unstable when its economic foundations shift.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Characterization of Matriarchs in How It Happened

4.1 Elderly Matriarchs supporting Classic Patriarchy

The protagonist, Zeba's mother is a central figure in the narrative that reflects the complexities of navigating patriarchal expectations. Her struggle between traditional roles and modern desires creates a rich complexity of familial dynamics. She aspires to live a life of freedom but she even reads French fiction secretly from her husband and her kids. "I snuck into my mother's cupboard and read all the Harlequin Romances that she pretended she didn't read" (Haider, 2012, p. 153). It shows that women living in a household prevailed by patriarchal notions have no freedom to openly read what she wants to. Shazaf Fatima Haider advocates for this freedom. Moreover, throughout the novel, her mother seems passive, always listening to Hossein, her husband and Dadi, her mother-in-law. The main character Dadi also shows the attributes of resilience and agency even from the early age. The grandmother's dominating soul in a fragile

body accurately depicts the values, traditions, and customs that are being forced on the generations to come so that they would not be lost. Through her, Haider personifies the Matriarchal Paradox. The matriarchal paradox refers to a phenomenon where an elderly woman fiercely enforces the patriarchal rules that limit female autonomy and dominating her family with guilt, domestic strictness and strategic theatricality. But Zeba along with Fati phupps defy this dominating behavior of Dadi.

Dadi firmly believes that marriage is just a social duty and a tool that maintains sectarian purity, especially within their Shia-Syed lineage, rather than a union of love. She regards romance as an absurd modern disease. "Sensible Bandian women know that this love-shove business is all nonsense. We must do our duty to please God and our husbands. That's it!" (Haider, 2012, p. 11). Sometimes matriarchs support patriarchal notions regarding marriages and matrimonial relationships. But other characters belonging to young adult generation defy these notions that are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures.

Dadi runs the household with absolute authority and establishes a clear hierarchy where other women i.e. her daughters-in-law must follow rigid rules. She strictly monitors the behavior of brides and highly believes that women should remain confined to the four walls of household. This reflects her positive bargain with patriarchy. "She must not want to get a job. What are men for?" (Haider, 2012, p. 32). This highlights her confession that men are superior and hold more power than women which aligns with patriarchal notion. Though Dadi herself makes all the decisions on her own without taking into count male members of the family. This toxic rise of matriarchy is also presented by Shazaf Fatima Haider. When she arrives at a potential bride's home and sees a young girl boldly answer the door, Dadi notes with disapproval, "Good girls did not have audacity to open the doors to their parents" (Haider, 2012, p. 61).

This study analyzes that under Classical Patriarchy that is prominent in geographical zones like South Asia, young brides enter their husbands' households as subordinated, powerless outsiders. They are subjected to the control of both men and older women.

The term Bargain refers to a woman internalizes and aggressively enforces patriarchal codes i.e. domestic submissiveness, purdah, and strict sectarianism. In return of this lifelong pressure and compliance, the system promises her a cyclic reward that as she ages, she will inherit absolute domestic autonomy and authority over the next generations of women i.e. her daughters-in-law and granddaughters. Dadi's domestic dictatorship is an exercise in Matriarchal Mimicry. She does not destroy patriarchal structures rather she rents them to secure her own survival and dominance. This notion also keeps women out of the labor market and safeguards the traditional economic dependency that keeps the patriarchal engine running. This simultaneously solidifies her position as the sole matriarchal manager of the home.

Kandiyoti notes that in classic patriarchy, a woman's long-term security depends on her ability to produce and emotionally attach herself to male heirs. Dadi's deep favoritism for her grandson, Haroon accurately aligns with her bargain. Her autonomy peaks because she claims ownership over the family's lineage. Dadi uses Haroon as her patriarchal shield. By controlling the selection of his wife, she ensures that her daughter-in-law will be subordinate to her. In this way she may extend her lease on domestic power into the next generational cycle." We were therefore to rely on the elders of our family for the management of all proposals, never taking matters into our own hands. We were to remain in a state of feminine helplessness" (Haider, 2012, p. 7).

Dadi utilizes emotional melodrama as a subversive compliance. Because classic patriarchy denies women overt, they must use alternative strategies to get their way. Dadi handles this through physical frailty, tears and fainting spells. "Dadi possesses the unique ability to faint at the drop of a hat, remaining flexible as long as you do exactly what she wants" (Haider, 20212). In

Kandiyoti's terms' this performance is a highly coordinated defensive mechanism. Dadi transforms apparent female weakness into an unassailable weapon of manipulation. The family cannot fight back against her demands because doing so violate the patriarchal code of honoring the elder mother.

4.2 Resistance and Resilience to the Bargain

In Deniz Kandiyoti's framework, when the socioeconomic conditions of Classic Patriarchy shift, the younger generation no longer finds the traditional bargain morally accepted. Instead of submitting to youth stage powerlessness in exchange for late-stage authority, Zeba and Fatima display resistance, active subversion and resilience to shift to the entirely new paths of autonomy. "Processes of macro-structural change, exert a powerful pressure on the patriarchal bargain, and set the stage for its breakdown or transformation" (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Fatima Phuppho shows resilience of the failed bargain. Under Classic Patriarchy, an unmarried or widow woman is viewed as a systemic anomaly just because she fails to secure a person or to produce male heirs. Fatima, as a widow rejects to live back in her maternal home, Dadi attempts to keep her subjugated as a cautionary tale. Fatima's resilience lies in her refusal to let her widow status define her value or diminish her spirit within the household. She does not perform the role of a miserable, repentant lady, instead she becomes an ally in fulfilling the modern desires of younger generation i.e. Zeba and Saliha. Despite her marginalized position, Fatima maintains her wit which often acts as a bridge of communication. She refuses to let Dadi's constant bargain with patriarchy crush her dignity.

"She is fifty now and has no children and is very relieved that this is the case. She looks at the lives of her other sister and brother and proudly proclaims herself free and a feminist. She is, an editor of a women's fashion magazine in Lahore and has taken to wearing sleeveless sari blouses and has the best figure I have ever seen in any fifty-year-old woman." (Haider, 2012, p. 12)

Fatima recognizes that the old bargain that is to endure an unhappy marriage just to secure future status and to stay in white clothes because you are a widow is a trap. By surviving outside the traditional marital contract, her resilience shatters the myth that a woman can only exist safely within a patriarchal structure. She refuses to accept that there is anything as sacred tradition. "I lived my life my way, not according to some archaic formula drawn by a palsied old man with a frown on his face and a fatwa on his lips!" (Haider, 2012, p. 247). She also believes that her husband did her a favor of dying and leaving her free to live her life the way she wanted. If Dadi represents the absolute enforcement of the bargain with patriarchy, her granddaughter Zeba represents its total refusal. Zeba's resistance is loud, and intellectual. She consciously identifies the hypocrisy of her grandmother's domestic tyranny. Zeba refuses to perform the submissive, silent behavior that is required to attract a traditional suitor. She is witty, challenges potential grooms and rejects the idea that her primary value lies in her ability to manage household chores and to handle husband. She argues against Dadi's robotic idea of marriages. She demands emotional reciprocity, "I want someone I can talk to, Dadi. Someone who understands me, not just someone who matches our caste and sect!" (Haider, 2012, p. 205). Zeba's ultimate act of resistance is her love marriage to a Sunni man. This act attacks the pillars of Dadi's authority;

1. Keeping the Syed bloodline pure
2. Arranged marriages, the mechanism through which Dadi exercises her power.

By choosing a partner based on mutual respect and romantic love rather than family arrangement, Zeba exits the system of Classical Patriarchy entirely. She does not wait to inherit power from Dadi rather she claims her autonomy immediately through individual choices.

5. Conclusion

Shazaf Fatima Haider uses Zeba and Fatima to illustrate the evolution of female agency in urban Pakistan. Dadi's power is deceptive because it relies on the continuation of patriarchy to exist and prevail. Zeba and Fatima's resistance signals a structural shift. A shift from blindly following and obeying classic patriarchal notions and those which support it i.e. matriarchs. By refusing to bargain both the characters force the matriarchal structure supporting patriarchy to bend. Hence, ultimately, they show that true female autonomy comes from dismantling the patriarchal wheel, not learning how to steer it.

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