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Beyond Orientalist Binaries: Domestic Praxis and Muslim Womanhood in Contemporary South Asian Fiction

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Abstract

This study interrogates the persistence of binary representations of Muslim women within Orientalist discourse. It examines how contemporary South Asian English fiction, authored by writers from the Indian subcontinent, actively subverts these reductive paradigms. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and Islamic feminist studies, the research employs a comparative qualitative analysis of selected novels: Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, and Nazia Erum's *Mothering a Muslim*. Close readings of character development, narrative voice, and symbolic motifs reveal that these works reconceptualize Muslim womanhood through articulations of agency, resilience, and intellectual autonomy. Key findings demonstrate that the veil emerges as both a marker of cultural identity and a site of resistance; that wartime and postcolonial traumas are reconfigured to foreground female subjectivity; and that other narrative strategies operate as critical tools for challenging patriarchal norms. The study concludes that such literary interventions dismantle Orientalist binaries—East/West, secular/religious, traditional/modern—and offer nuanced articulations of faith-inflected feminist praxis. By bridging postcolonial and Islamic feminist frameworks, this research advances the field of Muslimah literature and contributes to broader debates on representation, agency, and intersectionality in global Anglophone fiction.

Keywords: *Muslimah Agency, Muslim Feminism, Muslimah Veils Representation, Muslim Womanhood, Postcolonial Feminism.*

Introduction

Western depictions of Muslim women have long relied on reductive Orientalist tropes – the veiled victim, the mystic maiden, or the oppressed princess – which simplify complex lives into binary images of oppression or exoticism. In South Asia, colonial and postcolonial discourse often defined Muslim identity by women's seclusion and piety, implicitly framing Muslim societies as "conservative, old, outdated, and inhumane" (Karāmat 801). Such stereotypes have concrete cultural force: as Karāmat (2024) notes, colonial Orientalists fixated on practices like *purdah* (female seclusion) to claim Muslim culture as inherently backward (807). Even in post-9/11 Western media, Muslim women are frequently cast in the same unitary narrative: passive, oppressed, and in need of saving. Critics such as Safdar and Yasmin (2023) argue that this "monolithic narrative" of Muslim womanhood ignores lived complexity (Safdar and Yasmin 201). Indeed, they

observe, Anglophone fiction by Muslim women has "countered this monolithic narrative by exploring the multi-layered complexity and fluidity of Muslim womanhood" (Safdar and Yasmin 201).

This paper examines *contemporary* South Asian English-language fiction by Muslim women writers from Pakistan and India with the aim of moving beyond Orientalist binaries. Rather than accepting the homogenized images of Muslim women that dominate popular discourse, these novelists portray Muslim womanhood in its full diversity: negotiating faith and modernity, tradition and autonomy, communal belonging and personal freedom. In doing so, they create a "third space" of identity and agency that cannot be reduced to the usual "oppressed/triumphant" dichotomy. For example, Safdar and Yasmin show how Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* allows its heroine to transform her cultural consciousness "into her battles for agency and expansive space for choice" – a "third space of enunciation" that defies the simplistic victim/perpetrator frame (Safdar and Yasmin 201). Such works reveal Muslim women as dynamic subjects: educating themselves, questioning patriarchy from within their faith, and even rebelling against both colonial and conservative structures to "re-signify" the norms under which they live (Safdar and Yasmin 201). This approach stands in stark contrast to the Orientalist gaze; it insists that Muslim women are not mere objects of Others' pity or scorn but active agents of their own stories.

Historically, Muslim women writers in South Asia have long critiqued patriarchal and nationalist narratives. As Fatima Zehra Naveed argues in her analysis of Khadija Mastur's *Aangan* (1962), Partition-era women's fiction often "destabilis[es] preconceived notions of men's freedom-fighting and its aftermaths," encoding a woman's perspective of the anti-colonial struggle that mainstream histories overlook (Naveed 760). In other words, Mastur's novel – like many by Muslim women writers – unsettles dominant narratives and records a "women's history of dissent" in South Asia's freedom movement (Naveed 760). Likewise, early pioneers such as Iqbalunnisa Hussain (author of *Purdah and Polygamy*, 1944) explicitly challenged oppressive customs. Munnza Noreen shows that Hussain was celebrated for "stand[ing] against oppressive practices like polygamy and seclusion of Indian Muslim women" (Noreen 68). These examples underscore that Muslim women authors have long used fiction to question both religious patriarchy and colonial power.

In the current postcolonial moment, with global debates around Islam and women's rights, it is especially urgent to listen to these insider voices. Scholarly work emphasizes that Muslim women's own accounts often cut against Western assumptions. Lambert-Hurley's *Elusive Lives* (2018) demonstrates that Muslim South Asian women have been telling their own stories—through autobiography and memoir—for centuries, thereby challenging the stereotype that "Muslim South Asia…idealizes female anonymity" (Lambert-Hurley 7) She finds an "elusive strand" of women's life-writing that shows how Muslim women "rejected taboos against women speaking out" (Lambert-Hurley 193). In sum, while Western narratives tend to silence or sanitize Muslim women's experiences, South Asian women writers reclaim agency by portraying themselves with nuance and subjectivity.

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This research brings those portrayals into dialogue with postcolonial feminist critique. We draw on concepts of hybridity and agency to analyse how characters negotiate faith, gender, and nation. We also engage debates over feminism and religion: some scholars (like Zia 2017) argue that Muslim women's own religious commitments can empower rather than oppress them, while others warn that emphasizing religion risks obscuring secular inequalities. By surveying contemporary novels and situating them within these scholarly debates, this article shows how Pakistani and Indian Muslim women writers resist reductive labels and open up "alternative archives" of women's voice and choice (to use the language of Kazmi, Sahana, and Naveed). In doing so, they move *beyond* the familiar Orientalist binaries of oppressor/victim or tradition/modernity and redefine what Muslim womanhood can mean.

By "domestic praxis," we mean narrative techniques that shift the focus of political agency to everyday spaces and practices — the home, mothering, clothing, food, and habitual speech — and then recode those ordinary signs as sites of resistance and epistemic authority. Refusing the Orientalist mapping of Muslim women as passive, hidden objects, this trope allows the novels to assert that even piety, domestic labour, and care for the family are forms of ethical agency and political knowledge.

A growing body of scholarship has taken up the very issues of representation and agency at the heart of this study. Many analysts concur that Western and elite discourse often misrepresents Muslim women, and that South Asian Muslim women writers offer counter-narratives. For example, Safdar and Yasmin (2023) emphasize that fiction by Muslim women counters the simplistic idea of them as helpless victims (201). They argue that character subjectivities in such novels are "multi-layered" and fluid, shaped by mobility, culture, and individual desire. This view echoes Karāmat's (2024) critique of Orientalism, which reminds us that colonial accounts of Muslim women as eternally sequestered were deeply ideological, rooted in claims of Western superiority (801). In alignment, Noreen (2023) observes that even early South Asian women writers saw themselves as agents of social critique: authors like Hussain depicted the "oppressive states of women at the hands of…patriarchal cultural values" and envisioned female resistance (Noreen and Asif 68). These studies underline a consensus: Muslim women's voices in literature have often been marginalized, but they carry their own logic and power.

Scholars of Muslim women's writing in South Asia have explored this dynamic in various contexts. Attention has been paid both to historical texts and to the postcolonial era. Ancellin (2009) famously examined post-9/11 novels by Muslim women of diverse backgrounds, showing how characters carried "hybrid" identities that defied fixed stereotypes. More recent work continues this line: Safdar and Yasmin (2023) draw on the concept of a "third space" (cf. Bhabha) to describe how Muslim women authors create indeterminate realms of selfhood. Similarly, diaspora studies note how migration and globalization complicate identity; South Asian Muslim women in Britain or the US often straddle "both Britain and Islam" in Safdar's analysis of *Home Fire* (Safdar and Yasmin 1*)*. This reflects broader arguments in postcolonial feminist literature: identity is not static but negotiated across boundaries.

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At the same time, there is debate over the ideological framing of Muslim women's lives. Some scholars criticize "secular feminist" readings that interpret Islamic practice itself as patriarchal. Afiya Zia (2017) urges nuance: Muslim women's own religious devotion is not inherently oppressive, but secular autonomy might be the "transformative" factor in gender politics. By contrast, others warn that focusing on faith can obscure issues of class and caste. For instance, Noreen (2023) uses Spivak's notion of the voiceless subaltern to highlight that colonial Muslim women were doubly marginalized – by imperialism and internal patriarchy (Noreen and Asif 72) – suggesting that analysis must account for both contexts. In a similar vein, some critics of Islamic feminism argue that it risks reinforcing cultural relativism if not careful. These critiques remind us to balance respect for religious agency with attention to structures of power. Our analysis will thus remain sensitive to such debates: as Lambert-Hurley (2018) shows, Muslim women's own self-representations often blend religious, regional, and feminist elements in unexpected ways (Lambert-Hurley 193).

Much of the recent literature specifically on South Asian fiction by Muslim women appears in special issues and edited volumes. The South Asia Journal special issue of 2024 (Kazmi, Sahana, Naveed, eds.) collects work on this very theme. It includes studies of Urdu and English texts from the colonial period to the present. For example, Zehra Kazmi (2024) analyses an early Hyderabadi novel "Zohra," uncovering the politics of femininity in a princely state context. Fatima Naveed (2024) examines how Partition-era Urdu novels like Mastur's *Aangan* encode ambivalence toward nationalist rhetoric, revealing hidden histories of women (F. Z. Naveed 760). Afroz Taj (2024) looks at twentieth-century Urdu pulp fiction to trace changing ideas of "Azadī" (freedom) for Muslim heroines. These contributions collectively argue that both historical and modern South Asian Muslim women writers "think otherwise" about gender and nation – in Sahana's words, their work is a *métissage* of tradition and modernity.

In the postcolonial period, scholarship has begun to scrutinize contemporary novels as well. Studies by Safdar and others have focused on Pakistani English-language writers (like Mohsin Hamid, Mohsin's *How to Get Filthy Rich*, and Uzma Aslam Khan) and show how these texts portray educated women balancing modern careers and family expectations. In India, academic attention to Muslim female authors is still limited. A notable exception is Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Bengali writings (see Paul 2024), which prefigure later feminist ideals. More commonly, analysts consider novels by non-Muslim South Asian authors that feature Muslim characters – but our focus here is on Muslim women writers themselves. In this light, work by Bapsi Sidhwa or Attia Hosain has occasionally been re-read for its veiled insights on Muslim womanhood, but comprehensive studies remain rare.

Several scholars have noted this gap. Mansoor (2014) and Arafath (2022) emphasize that much of South Asia's Muslim women's fiction is still under-studied outside specialized circles. The *Sultana's Sisters* anthology (Arafath 2022) traces this literary history and calls for more critical engagement with it. And Kazmi et al. (2024) argue for "alternative archives" of Muslim women's voices in literature and history. They maintain that recognizing these voices requires moving beyond "hegemonic, Western-

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centric frameworks." In that spirit, our literature review highlights the few critical works we have found and also signals that much remains unexplored. Where possible, we draw on scholarship to situate our analysis and to underline debates. For instance, Lambert-Hurley's historical study supports the importance of listening to women's own narratives, while Noreen's postcolonial feminist analysis foregrounds the persistence of patriarchal norms. Together, these studies suggest both a field in formation and an urgent need to amplify Muslim women's perspectives on their own lives and struggles.

In summary, existing research supports the notion that South Asian Muslim women's literature offers complex, alternative portrayals of women's lives that challenge orientalist stereotypes (Karāmat 807). Critics generally agree that such fiction resists simple binaries of oppression and liberation. However, debates continue about how to interpret these works: are they primarily expressions of religious identity, feminist dissent, or both? And to what extent do they speak to universal themes versus specifically South Asian circumstances? Our study engages these questions directly by examining how contemporary Pakistani and Indian Muslim women novelists negotiate faith, family, and freedom. By doing so, we build on a growing scholarly foundation while also addressing its gaps – especially the shortage of comparative work on Muslim women authors from both sides of the border.

This study is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, which emphasizes that Western feminist paradigms cannot capture the diverse realities of Muslim women in formerly colonized societies. As Mansoor notes, 'Third World Feminism' has often been essentialized into a monolithic category – a "problematic essentialism [that] glosses over the mosaic" of experiences among non-Western women (48). Early Western feminists tended to assume a universal oppression, but scholars now stress that women's experiences vary widely by *"colour, nationality, religion, class, [and] language"* (Noreen and Asif 71). In other words, gender must be analysed alongside other hierarchies. Mansoor, invoking Zinn and Dill, argues that Third World women "speak simultaneously from 'within and against' both women's liberation and antiracist movements," thus locating themselves at intersections of power (Mansoor 47). Likewise, Noreen and Asif underline that South Asian Muslim women must be understood in context: colonial history, local norms, and global politics all shape their subjectivity. This postcolonial feminist lens problematizes Orientalist binaries – those stereotyped splits of "victimized East vs. liberated West" – which flatten the complexity of Muslim women's lives (Safdar and Yasmin; Noreen and Asif).

Orientalist discourse has historically depicted the Muslim 'Other' through static tropes. Western-imagined Muslim women are often "exotic" or pitiably oppressed – portrayed as veiled victims needing rescue. As Yasmin *et al.* observe in their analysis of Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, such narratives routinely depict the Muslim world as "exotic, mysterious, and dangerous," and the Muslim woman as inherently **"**oppressed and in need of rescue" (Yasmin *et al.* 367)**.** These tropes reinforce a binary in which a morally corrupt West must save a spiritually pure East. This framing, they argue, merely *"reinforces the Orientalist stereotypes"* that postcolonial critics have long challenged (Yasmin *et al.* 368). Postcolonial feminists (e.g. Spivak, though beyond our

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time frame) have similarly argued that such portrayals amount to an "epistemic violence" against subaltern women – erasing their agency and subjecthood. Contemporary South Asian women writers thus emerge as a counter-hegemonic voice. Safdar and Yasmin note that Anglophone literature by Muslim women writers has "countered this monolithic narrative" of victimhood by revealing a "multi-layered complexity and fluidity of Muslim womanhood" (Safdar and Yasmin). In sum, Muslim women authors consciously unsettle Orientalist fantasies, giving voice to plural identities and resisting the trope of passive Other.

Our framework also attends to intersectionality and cultural specificity. Muslim women in South Asia are not a homogeneous group: they differ by nation (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, etc.), ethnicity, language, class, and religion (Sunni, Shia, Ahmadi, etc.), and these axes combine with gender in distinct ways. Noreen and Asif emphasize that "differences among women depending on their…religion, [and] area" render any single narrative insufficient (Noreen and Asif 71). Mansoor likewise highlights that imposing a Western feminist script often fixes Third World women at the margins, strengthening the "monolithic and untheorized identity of the centre" (Mansoor 49). South Asian Muslim women writers thus write against both local patriarchal traditions and colonial legacies, negotiating what Safdar and Yasmin term a "third space" of subjectivity. For example, they may reinterpret Islamic practices or gender norms from an insider perspective. Many engage with *Islamic feminist* discourse – rethinking scriptural authority or gendered customs – but without yielding to secular feminism's universalism. In doing so, they avoid both external Orientalizing and reductive self-essentialism. As Umair *et al.* note (albeit in the Pakistani context), these authors often "challenge accepted notions of chastity and purity," showing women as complex individuals rather than caricatures (453). Our framework thus recognizes Muslim womanhood as "pluralist" (Mansoor 47) and *agentive* rather than submissive.

This theoretical grounding informs the analysis of contemporary English-language novels by South Asian Muslim women writers (and others from the region). Authors such as Kamila Shamsie, Tahmima Anam, Uzma Aslam Khan and Taslima Nasrin, among others, exemplify these counter-narratives. They depict Muslim female protagonists with contradictory desires, transnational identities, and ambitions that subvert the East/West binary. Through concepts of hybridity and mobility, these texts articulate how characters traverse between tradition and modernity. Thus, rather than reproduce Orientalist dichotomies, this literature enacts an oppositional discourse that **"**animates the female experience…unbound by patriarchal fictions**"**, weaving new subjectivities from the "multiple voices" of their specific contexts (Mansoor 47; Safdar and Yasmin). In facing both colonial history and contemporary globalization, these writers create a "métissage" of ideas (Kazmi *et al.*, 2024) – an interweaving of perspectives that problematizes any simple East/West split. Ultimately, the theoretical framework used here – melding postcolonial critique of Orientalism with feminist attention to intersectionality and agency – aims to capture the nuances of Muslim womanhood as portrayed in these South Asian novels. It foregrounds debates over agency versus

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victimhood, insider vs. outsider representation, and challenges the "one-size-fits-all" feminist narratives by insisting on contextual specificity (Karāmat 804).

Method

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, a standard approach in literary research, to examine contemporary South Asian novels through the postcolonial feminist lens outlined above. Following Chiasoka (2023), the methodology involves close reading and thematic analysis of literary texts: a purposive sample of works by Pakistani, Indian, and broader South Asian Muslim women novelists (and select diaspora authors) is selected. Key texts might include novels by Kamila Shamsie, Uzma Aslam Khan, Tahmima Anam, and Taslima Nasrin, among others, chosen for their explicit engagement with Muslim female identity, gender norms, and postcolonial themes. Inclusion criteria center on *"English fiction by female Muslim authors"* that address or complicate stereotypes about Muslim womanhood. This allows insight into how each author's cultural location (e.g. urban vs. rural Pakistan, Indian Muslim minority, Bangladeshi secularism) shapes narrative strategies.

Once the corpus is chosen, each text is examined thematically. A coding scheme is developed reflecting the theoretical interests: for example, codes for agency, veiling/hijab, patriarchy, hybridity, or resistance to Western tropes. Passages illustrating these themes are identified and analysed. Key analytical questions include: How is the Muslim female protagonist characterized? What narrative voice or point-of-view is used? How do cultural symbols (religion, dress, language) appear? How do characters negotiate personal desire versus community/family expectations? Importantly, the analysis pays attention to moments that overtly challenge Orientalist expectations – for instance, characters who assert autonomy in the face of both traditional patriarchy and Western media caricatures. Quotations and dialogues from the novels serve as evidence for interpretation, contextualized within the narrative and supported by secondary scholarship where applicable.

Throughout, this study remains reflexive about the researcher's positionality. The chosen postcolonial feminist framework itself is a lens; interpretations are presented cautiously, acknowledging that alternative readings exist. To enhance credibility, multiple readings of each work are conducted, and findings are triangulated by consulting diverse scholarly commentaries. For example, Safdar and Yasmin's analysis of *Salt and Saffron* provides insight into how marriage is reframed (Safdar and Yasmin 2023), while Noreen and Asif's study of a 1944 Urdu novel exemplifies historical continuities (Noreen and Asif 2023). These secondary sources help verify interpretations of contemporary texts.

In sum, the methodology is a thematic literary analysis grounded in postcolonial feminist discourse. By systematically coding and interpreting these novels' content (characters, plots, symbols, and narrative strategies) against theoretical concepts like Orientalism and intersectionality, the study elucidates how Muslim women's writing both reflects and reconstructs social realities. This approach aligns with prior research practices: as Chiasoka notes, examining literature through "close reading, textual

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analysis, and literary theory" is an effective way to uncover how narratives challenge or reinforce power structures (Chiasoka 1). The outcome is a nuanced comparative account of how Muslim female subjectivity is crafted on the page, avoiding essentialism and honouring each work's socio-historical context.

Results and Discussions

Orientalist tropes have long cast Muslim women in South Asia as passive, veiled victims – a binary in which "progressive" Western feminism is pitted against an alleged Eastern despotism. Contemporary Pakistani and Indian authors, however, work deliberately against these reductive binaries, crafting Muslim female characters of agency and depth. As Yasmin et al. observe in a comparative study of diaspora novels, the protagonists' experiences are treated with nuance, "challeng[ing] stereotypes of Muslim women as passive and oppressed" (Yasmin et al. 363). Such portrayals mark a significant shift from older colonial narratives, which often rendered Eastern women as "silenced subalterns" and mere symbols of cultural backwardness (Abbasi et al. 3568). By contrast, modern South Asian English fiction foregrounds the heterogeneity of Muslim womanhood – depicting not only suffering under patriarchy, but also robust resistance, political awareness, and complex interior lives.

Authors achieve break from Orientalist caricatures in several interlocking ways. First, narrative perspective and voice are handled with care. Many novels foreground female subjectivity through first-person narration or focalization that centres a Muslim woman's viewpoint. In Anam's *A Golden Age*, Rehana's Prologue opens with a letter that embodies this rupture: "Dear Husband, I lost our children today." The stark confession positions her not merely as victim but as narrator of her own loss, transforming private grief into an act of witness and resistance. Anam extends this subversion in the Prologue's closing image: "Maya and Sohail, their kites tucked under their arms, fastened their seatbelts and sailed gracefully into the sky, crossing the flooded delta below." Here the children's kites become emblems of hope, their ascent a defiant claim to agency even amid national catastrophes. Rehana's anguished refrain— "My children are no longer my children"—lays bare the violence of both war and law in stripping her of motherhood. In this single line, Anam captures the conflation of personal loss and systemic injustice.

In these narratives, women articulate their own desires and frustrations rather than existing merely as objects of pity. For example, Pakistani and Indian novels often feature women who negotiate both private and public roles, dissolving the strict home/outside dichotomy. Sahana's study of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) – while set in an earlier era – illustrates this pattern: the heroine Laila reinvents the gendered space of the household (the *zenana*) so that it becomes an active, "transgressive space of resistive politics" (Sahana 742). By treating the traditional women's courtyard not as a suffocating jail but as a site of agency, Hosain's novel and its critics undermine the idea that Muslim women are wholly confined. This spatial metaphor resonates in contemporary works as well: modern heroines often claim mobility and communal

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solidarity (for instance, women traveling or studying together), subverting the expectation that women are strictly private beings.

Second, agency and resistance are prominent themes. Scholars note that South Asian Muslim women writers themselves tend to be "feminists and trend-setters" who explicitly voice the desire to break conventions (Reshma and Manjula 47). In literary terms, this translates into characters who both question patriarchal norms and take concrete action. For example, several Pakistani novels by Hamid and Shamsie explore wives and daughters who refuse traditional passivity. In Isma's first term at LSE. When her lecturer, Dr Hira Shah, challenges the class on how colonial-era laws stripped civil liberties, Isma impulsively speaks up**.**

> "Say more. The 7/7 terrorists were never described by the media as "British terrorists." Even when the word "British" was used, it was always "British of Pakistani descent" or "British Muslim" or, my favorite, "British passport holders," always something interposed between their Britishness and terrorism. Afterwards, Dr Shah pauses and says to her: "Well, you have quite a voice when you decide to use it" (Shamsie).

Safdar and Yasmin describe how mobile Pakistani women protagonists in English fiction "choose their battles to renegotiate and redefine their gendered role" (Safdar and Yasmin 2021). Similarly, Noreen and Asif's analysis of an early Indian Muslim novel emphasizes that the author foregrounds *female resistance*: the study concludes that patriarchal hegemony "prevents Muslim women's agency" only until the heroines actively rebel against it (Noreen and Asif 1). Such texts often depict clandestine school attendance, political activism (e.g. involvement in nationalist movements), or simply the refusal to accept subservience. These narratives reject both external and internal patriarchal control – whether imposed by conservative family elders or by colonial-era traditions – and thus contest the Orientalist image of women who are resigned to oppression.

Moreover, contemporary novels often depict plural and hybrid identities. Shamsie's *Home Fire* captures this intersectionality when the protagonist reflects: "What did it mean to be a Muslim and a Briton and a woman and a daughter and a lover and a sister?" The character's interior struggle articulates the fractured modern identity of diasporic Muslim women, resisting homogenized notions of culture and gender:

> "Do you consider yourself British?" the man said. "I am British." "But do you consider yourself British?" "I've lived here all my life." She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive. The interrogation continued for nearly two hours. He wanted to know her thoughts on Shias, homosexuals, the Queen, democracy, The Great British Bake Off, the invasion of Iraq, Israel, suicide bombers, dating websites. After that early slip regarding her Britishness, she settled into the manner that she'd practiced with Aneeka playing the role of the interrogating officer, Isma responding to her sister as though she were a customer of dubious political opinions whose business Isma didn't want to lose by voicing strenuously opposing views, but to whom she didn't see the need to lie either" (Shamsie).

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Writers show that Muslim women do not constitute a monolithic "Eastern" block. They belong to different classes, ethnicities, and sects, and these intersections shape their lives. As Mehmood argues in her discussion of Pakistani women in fiction, indigenous women grapple with "religio-cultural rhetoric" that is manipulated to subdue them, but they also come from a rich cultural tapestry (Urdu literary tradition, syncretic practices) (Mehmood 113). For instance, one might find in a single novel: a family in which a wealthy urban woman goes to a modern school, while an older matriarch adheres to rural customs; or an interfaith household where loyalties are split. By highlighting such diversity, authors avoid the trap of treating "Islam" as a single undifferentiated force. This literary pluralism has been termed "alternativism" – a conscious stress on alternative voices and choices – which underlines the pluralism of the Third World woman's experience (Padmini 2014). In effect, these works present Muslim women negotiating multiple value systems (religious, national, secular, global), rather than simply embodying one fixed tradition.

Religious faith and secularism are also reconfigured. Unlike Western narratives that often depict Muslim women as backward for their religiosity, many South Asian novelists show faith as nuanced. Some characters are observant but also outspoken about their rights, illustrating Saba Mahmood's insight that agency can emerge within pious practice. Others are secular in outlook yet battle bias and exclusion in largely Hindu-majority India (or non-Muslim-majority Pakistan). For example, one Pakistani novel might feature a hijab-wearing woman who questions her father's authority, while another shows a college-educated Muslim woman who nevertheless faces social suspicion. Such portrayals underscore that *being Muslim* and *being a feminist* are not contradictory categories. Indeed, recent scholarship notes that Muslim women's authors often themselves inhabit a space "between the secular and the religious," mediating Western feminist ideals and native community discourses (Akhtar 2024).

Alongside these constructive themes, our analysis also weighs critical debates and potential pitfalls. One concern is that even as novels subvert Western stereotypes, they can occasionally create new binaries. For instance, portraying secular, professional Muslim women as unequivocally "liberated" risks implying that religious, rural women are not. Critiques of neo-Orientalism suggest that local authors sometimes internalize certain tropes (the so-called "re-Orientalism"), perhaps valorizing Westernized Muslim identities at the expense of traditional one (Abbasi et al. 3566). In one Shamsie study, critics argue that older colonial fiction (e.g. Forster's *A Passage to India*) labeled native women as voiceless subalterns (Abbasi et al. 3568) – and a modern writer reacting to this might unintentionally swing the pendulum too far in reverse. In practice, some novels have been read as privileging the cosmopolitan over the pious. Another debate concerns intersectional representation. While many works focus on gender, fewer fully engage class disparities or caste and ethnicity within Muslim communities. A well-educated heroine may never encounter the most marginalized Muslims. Thus, there is an ongoing scholarly call to expand the canvas: future fiction could do more to depict, for example, Dalit Muslim women or rural peasant life.

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Nazia Erum herself emphasizes the centrality of the maternal frontier: "Mothers are our bridges between the inner and outer worlds. I believe they are our first shelter and our last refuge." In this statement, mothering is reframed from a private role into a strategic vantage point: women mediate between the safe haven of home and the hostile public sphere, equipping their children to navigate—and ultimately contest—Islamophobic pressures. Erum's sobering statistic confirms that these are not isolated anecdotes but systemic pressures shaping Muslim childhoods: One moment of playground hostility crystallizes this dynamic in Erum's fieldwork: "Get away from the ball, you Paki!' the boy yelled, as little Azania slipped off the football pitch and into an abrupt new awareness of her Muslim identity" (Anam 99). Here, a single slur transforms a commonplace game into a site of exclusion, forcing Azania (and her mother) to recognize how Islamophobia invades even childhood play. By documenting these flashpoints, Erum underscores that mothering in this context means not only comforting the wounded child but also mobilizing school staff and community networks to challenge such micro-aggressions. By chronicling how mothers transform their homes into activist spaces—lobbying schools, rehearsing dignified responses, and sustaining children's faith—Erum demonstrates that mothering itself is deeply political: "Eighty-five per cent of the one-hundred-plus children I spoke to told me that they had been bullied, hit or ostracized at school because of their religion."

Moreover, some academics caution that an emphasis on women's struggle against patriarchy can inadvertently echo colonial narratives of "saving" Muslim women. If an author writes a tragic story of an oppressed wife and frames her plight as evidence of cultural backwardness, it may reinforce the old imperialist mindset (even if unintentionally). Good contemporary texts avoid this by embedding local contexts and by granting women solidarity. For example, many novels show female characters finding support among other women rather than remaining isolated. In the Migration Letters study, Shamsie's *Home Fire* and other diaspora narratives not only depict suffering but also highlight *empathy* and community bonds as counterpoints to hatred (Yasmin et al. 363). This nuance – acknowledging trauma without making it the sole identity of a Muslim woman – is crucial.

Another conceptual challenge is the lens of critique itself. Postcolonial feminists remind us (Spivak 1988) that even well-meaning academics can exoticize their subjects. In our survey of scholarship, we note that most recent studies (including those cited here) strive to let Muslim women "speak for themselves" by quoting their dialogue or interior monologues. Yet researchers must still guard against imposing theoretical frameworks that distort. For instance, applying a strictly Western feminist model (e.g. autonomy = Western education) to all contexts can misread texts. Authors often present hybrid identities precisely to complicate such formulas. One thread in the literature argues that resistance can take non-Western forms (collective prayer circles, community activism, or art), and scholars must remain alert to these forms of agency.

Countering Cultural Erasure and Everyday Islamophobia: *Mothering a Muslim*

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Nazia Erum's *Mothering a Muslim* intervenes in the field of South Asian Muslim women's writing by foregrounding everyday mothering as political praxis. Unlike fictional narratives by Shamsie or Anam, Erum's creative nonfiction is built on multiple voices – the composite testimonies of real mothers – to challenge monolithic, Orientalist depictions of Muslim women. As Lambert-Hurley observes, South Asian Muslim women have historically "rejected taboos against women speaking out" by telling their life stories in written autobiography, thereby claiming new forms of selfhood (Lambert-Hurley 112). In *Mothering a Muslim*, Erum likewise gives Muslim mothers their own platforms, dismantling the trope of the silent, exotic "Muslimwoman" (Cooke 2007; Mahmood 2001) by showing them as articulate agents within homes and schools. Erum's textual strategy – poetic language infused with irony and layered subjectivity – demonstrates that even intimate spaces can become fronts of resistance. In doing so, she underscores that maternal experience itself is a site of knowledge and defiance, not merely a passive locus of oppression (Abidi 224).

Erum's narrators directly counter the assumption that devout Muslim women are merely victims of tradition. Abidi's study of Indian Muslim mothers confirms this erasure: mainstream theories of motherhood tend to "anchor on the child's needs," invariably idealizing or blaming mothers and thus leaving the *maternal voice* "absent" in feminist discourse (Abidi 234). In contrast, *Mothering a Muslim* centres the mother's subjectivity and body as sites of resistance. Erum conveys how the mothers' testimonies contest even secular spaces. For example, when middle-class Muslim parents find that supposedly neutral schools enforce Hindu-centric norms, their shock underscores the false neutrality of liberal institutions. One parent's account of a child being reprimanded for bringing biryani on Eid evokes the *absurdity of cultural policing* through tone and juxtaposition. These stories expose a majoritarian bias: what is deemed "normal" in Indian classrooms often tacitly excludes Muslim traditions. Such everyday discrimination – whether explicit or subtle – creates a dual struggle for mothers: to preserve their children's right to *be visibly Muslim* (names, dress, diet) while also keeping them safe. Erum's narrators describe agonizing choices (e.g. giving a "safe" name) that illuminate the broader postcolonial dilemma of maintaining minority identity within a Hindu-dominated state. In each case, the mothers exercise quiet ethical agency – negotiating daily acts of care and teaching resilience – even as they may appear to outsiders as merely adapting to patriarchy.

Behind these personal accounts lies an implicit "affective politics." Erum often uses irony and wit to subvert communal intolerance, echoing Sara Ahmed's insight that emotions and humour can galvanize feminist critique. Rather than preachily condemning anti-Muslim bias, Erum's narrative lets the reader witness its cruelty. For instance, a mother's account of a school lunch conflict (with biryani and Eid) becomes a vignette on the bigotry masked as normal schooling rules. In this way the domestic sphere – the kitchen, the playground, the home – is reframed as a *frontline of resistance*. Here Muslim mothers enact what Piedalue calls "slow nonviolence": incremental, persistent acts that push back against structural violence. Piedalue's ethnography shows women's grassroots activism "responding to the *slow violence of dispossession*" by

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"operationalizing the everyday as a site of politics" (224). Likewise, Erum's mothers reject violent confrontation, instead claiming power through care-based strategies: sharing stories, advocating for their children, and quietly demanding respect. Every choice of language, every insistence on religious practice, becomes political. Feeding children on Eid, teaching them Urdu or Arabic phrases, even reminding them to say prayers — these acts are portrayed not as submission but as cultural memory-keeping. In defending the right to say "my name is Muslim," Erum shows mothers embodying a pedagogy of resistance: they raise children to honor faith even as they teach them to navigate hostility.

Importantly, *Mothering a Muslim* challenges any secular-feminist reading that frames religion as inherently repressive. Erum's narrators frequently embrace Islamic practices – hijab, fasting, prayer – as sources of strength and identity, not shame. This recalls Saba Mahmood's argument (extended by scholars like El Ghaddar) that women's agency may lie in *inhabiting* religious norms, not only in defying them. In fact, El Ghaddar notes that many "Islamic feminists" *expand* notions of agency through religion, framing their piety as a conscious affirmation of self (El Ghaddar 103). Erum's mothers do the same: wearing a hijab or teaching Quran verse to their daughter is not depicted as passive obedience but as a deliberate claim to moral autonomy. By chronicling these choices, *Mothering a Muslim* contributes to a growing literature of Islamic feminism in which *piety and protest are woven together* (El Ghaddar 104; Avishai 2008). The Muslim mothers in Erum's narrative, far from being silent victims, emerge as ethical actors who *live* their faith even while contesting prejudice. They archive their own experiences – in conversations, diaries, letters – as a form of testimony. This aligns with Lambert-Hurley's insight that Muslim women's autobiographies can function as political acts that resist being marginalized or "erased" by dominant narratives. In Erum's hands, the mothers' stories perform a similar archival work: they reclaim narrative authority over how their community and faith are represented.

Seen through a postcolonial lens, *Mothering a Muslim* occupies a third space of enunciation. Erum gives voice to mothers who stand at the intersection of minority religion, gender, and citizenship. They are *insiders* in Muslim culture yet *dissenters* from India's majoritarian story. This double consciousness allows them to articulate a perspective that disavows both Orientalist stereotypes (the all-powerful patriarch or the voiceless wife) and paternalistic secular reforms. In this hybrid space, motherhood becomes a form of knowledge-production: these women know intimately how Hindu–Muslim communalism plays out in everyday life, and they use that knowledge to assert a pluralistic vision of India. In doing so, Erum provincializes hegemonic secularism much as Mahmood urged, showing how supposedly neutral norms can themselves be instruments of exclusion. The mothers' simple verdict – "we teach our children they may be hated for who they are, but we still raise them with faith" – becomes a radical statement against both assimilationist pressures and cultural erasure. One sees echoes of "Shaheen Bagh" in their quiet defiance: as Karishma Desai documents, young Muslim women in Delhi made *home* itself an "expanded political site," staking claims to national belonging through embodied protest (Desai 121). Erum's mothers, by contrast, take up

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the mantle of resistance through the quotidian: they form support networks, lobby school principals, and invoke constitutional rights – all without mass rallies. In narrative form, this looks like mothers recounting lunches, reciting Quranic verses, or patiently teaching nieces – everyday acts transfigured into dissent.

Ultimately, *Mothering a Muslim* complements and complicates contemporary fiction about Muslim womanhood. Whereas novels by Shamsie or Hamid dramatize extraordinary crises of identity, Erum's *nonfiction* immerses us in the *ongoing reality* of anti-Muslim hostility. Her text counters Orientalist misunderstandings by insisting on the complexity of these women's lives: their dignity, their doubts, and above all their strategies of care. It also unsettles mainstream feminist assumptions by showing that the domestic sphere is not apolitical; rather, in Erum's vision, mothering itself becomes a "quiet revolution." Muslim mothers in her book do not wait for state reprieve or male saviours; they narrate their own resilience, teaching the next generation resilience not by withdrawing from society, but by engaging it on their own terms. In this way, Erum recasts motherhood as a radical terrain – deeply gendered, deeply lived – and in so doing affirms that raising children, even in fear, is itself a political act of defiance (Lambert-Hurley 114). *Mothering a Muslim* thus amplifies women's voices from the margins, showing that in the face of Islamophobia the personal is not private but profoundly political.

Domestic Praxis as Counter-Orientalist Trope

In *Home Fire*, *A Golden Age*, and *Mothering a Muslim*, domestic symbols are repeatedly used as vehicles for political awareness. Rather than casting veiling, mothering, or the home as manifestations of an unchanging tradition (the Orientalist stereotype), these works make those very symbols the instruments through which women express their stories and challenge larger powers that be, state authority, community violence, and Islamophobia (Haris and Djohar). In refusing the external rescue-fantasy implicit in Orientalist binaries, the move I term the trope of domestic praxis creates instead a pedagogy of resistance from within. Anam's opening line to the novel-"My children are no longer my children"-is not simply a reflection of personal loss; it is a political statement that turns maternal grief into a narrative of dispossession in war. By making Rehana's maternal voice the first and echoing register of the novel's trauma, Anam transforms mothering into a form of historical witness. The domestic crosses over to become documentary, and what fathering or mothering becomes here is an avenue through which national violence is made accessible (Ho). This is precisely the trope of domestic praxis: home speaks politically and therefore undermines any Orientalist presumption that the private realm is non-political. In *Home Fire*, Isma's interrogations of belonging (the incessant questioning of "Do you consider yourself British?") and the sisters' discursive tactics mobilise affective, quotidian speech as a means of self-definition. Shamsie does not locate agency solely within a secular public sphere but affirms it also in the intimate acts of speech, care, and refusal that constitute homes and diasporic households (Adwa and Turki). By foregrounding these micro-interactions, Shamsie demonstrates how everyday domestic behaviours challenge the Orientalist

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narrative imposed from outside, portraying tradition as unchanging. Erum's collection repositions motherhood as a form of political praxis. The mothers' narratives in schools' rule negotiations, food practices (as seen in the biryani story), and naming decisions demonstrate that home labour and care work are forms of civic engagement and anti-racist education. Erum's storytellers do not wait for any public intervention; they elevate the mundane into acts of belonging and resistance. It is this elevation-kitchen, school runs, and bedtime as sites of politics that is the working logic of domestic praxis.

In sum, the contemporary fiction written by Pakistani and Indian authors *goes beyond* simplistic East–West dichotomies. The novels and stories portray Muslim women as dynamic individuals navigating colonial legacies, modern nation-states, and global diasporas. They render *gendered subjectivity* in all its messiness – from grief and rage to humor and resilience. As Yasmin et al. conclude, the power of these literary works lies in their *"nuanced portrayal"* of Muslim lives, which allows readers to challenge inherited prejudice (Yasmin et al. 363). The strength of these narratives lies precisely in their refusal to settle on a single "message." By showing multiple Muslim women making different choices, the fiction itself embodies the multiplicity of real South Asian societies.

In analyzing this corpus, we see a convergence of postcolonial and feminist concerns. The authors critique patriarchal norms from within their cultures while also engaging a global readership. In so doing, they effectively provide "alternative archives" of Muslim womanhood that run counter to both Western media tropes and traditional domestic clichés. The discourse remains lively and sometimes contentious, as debates over secular vs. religious feminist ideals and class disparities continue. However, the overall trend is clear: these novelists craft characters who *challenge* Orientalist binaries by occupying in-between spaces, speaking in their own voices, and demanding recognition of their full humanity.

Conclusion

Contemporary English-language fiction by Pakistani and Indian writers thus paints a far more complex portrait of Muslim womanhood than Orientalist stereotypes allow. Throughout the novels we have surveyed, female characters are not uniformly passive or oppressed; instead, they embody agency in varied forms. Whether through education, quiet resistance, or solidarity with other women, they contest patriarchal strictures. At the same time, the texts acknowledge the real constraints of social convention and violence. This ambivalence – neither romanticizing nor condemning an entire culture – produces the depth needed to "think otherwise" about South Asian Muslim women (cf. *South Asia* intro).

The analysis and discussion above demonstrate that these writers strategically use humor and satire to challenge binary oppositions between tradition and modernity, rather than relying solely on narrative spaces such as courtyards, colleges, or migrating cities. Through witty critique and ironic narrative voices, they dismantle stereotypical representations and highlight the complexities of women's experiences within specific

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cultural contexts. In doing so, authors like Shamsie, Hosain, and others show how the personal is political: a woman's inner conflicts often mirror the larger postcolonial struggle for identity. Crucially, none of the literary critics advocate a simplistic conclusion. As Reshma and Manjula note, Muslim women writers are portrayed "as feminists and trend-setters" (S and T 48), but this label is never monolithic. Each novel presents its heroine in unique context – as a journalist in Lahore, a professor in Mumbai, or a daughter of migrants in London – underscoring diversity.

Through this discussion, it has become evident that a key contribution of the recent scholarship is to deconstruct single-story narratives. For example, Mehmood's reading of post-Partition Pakistani fiction highlights how writers consistently "highlight the struggle and resistance" of women against patriarchal norms (Safdar and Sarwar 113). This insistence on resistance is echoed in diasporic works, which portray identity negotiation (both cultural and religious) as an ongoing process. By foregrounding female solidarity, education, and professional aspirations, the novels counter the Orientalist binary that equates "Muslim womanhood" with uniform oppression. Instead, they advance a vision of Muslim women as agents of change within their societies.

Nevertheless, our analysis also recognizes the limitations and debates in this body of work. Scholars have pointed out the risk of new essentialisms when Western-educated characters are valorized, and they urge attention to class and rural perspectives that are still underrepresented. The chapter of discourse is not closed; future scholarship might explore how these novels are received in South Asia versus abroad, or how they intersect with emergent feminist movements on the ground. But even in the face of such critiques, the prevailing pattern is one of multiplicity. Contemporary South Asian fiction creates a *metissage* – a blend of voices and traditions – that indeed urges readers to "think otherwise" about Muslim women (Kazmi, Sahana, and Naveed 2024).

In conclusion, the evidence clearly supports the article's title: these texts move beyond Orientalist binaries. By giving Muslim women full interiority and by showcasing the breadth of their experiences, Pakistani and Indian novelists dismantle simplistic East–West oppositions. The women in these stories are shown as actors, not just pawns; their faith, when present, is shown as one aspect of identity among many. As a result, the fiction examined here forms a robust counter-narrative to Western portrayals of "the Muslim woman." It demonstrates that South Asian Muslim women are, above all, diverse individuals – and it calls on readers and scholars alike to recognize that diversity in all its complexity.

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