

**Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)**

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: 3006-1296 Online ISSN: 3006-130X

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Anti-Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in The Shadow of the Crescent Moon****Oroosa Anwar**

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[oroosaanwarkhan@gmail.com](mailto:oroosaanwarkhan@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

*Fatima Bhutto's novel The Shadow of the Crescent Moon vividly portrays the conflict-ridden town of Mir Ali, marked by terrorism, injustice, fear, and deprivation of basic rights. Amid this backdrop of misery and isolation, the novel challenges traditional gender stereotypes that depict women as submissive, weak, dependent, emotionally fragile, and inferior to men, while men are seen as courageous, independent, and dominant. This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in feminist literary criticism, drawing on Lois Tyson's (2006) framework to interrogate patriarchal gender roles and Patricia Hill Collins' (2004) Matrix of Domination to examine intersecting oppressions of gender, class, ethnicity, and conflict. Through close textual analysis delimited to the characters of Samarra and Mina, the study demonstrates how Bhutto subverts conventional gender roles. Samarra, introduced as a tomboyish girl who engages in activities typically reserved for males such as playing cricket, riding horses, shooting pellet guns, and motorbikes, exhibits remarkable bravery and independence. Despite abandonment by her father and lover Aman Erum, denial of education, and brutal kidnapping and torture, Samarra refuses to succumb. She remains silent during abduction, confronts her torturers defiantly, and transforms into a resilient rebel, leading a secret plot against authority, defying societal norms by smoking publicly and rejecting veils. Similarly, Mina, a psychology lecturer shattered by the terrorist killing of her son Zalan, evolves from grief-stricken withdrawal to fierce confrontation. In a life-threatening encounter with Taliban militants, while her husband Sikandar cowers, lies, and begs for mercy, Mina boldly reveals her faith, physically attacks the armed men, and vociferously condemns them for their injustices, invoking her son's innocent death. Through these portrayals, Bhutto illustrates women as courageous, determined, and capable of enduring and resisting oppression more effectively than men, negating stereotypes and highlighting female agency in a patriarchal, war-torn society.*

**Keywords:** Fatima Bhutto, Shadow of the Crescent Moon, Gender stereotypes, Women empowerment, Samarra, Courage

**Introduction**

*The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* is written by Fatima Bhutto. She has depicted the true picture of Mir Ali in this novel. Mir Ali is deprived of its basic rights. Its hospitals, universities and even its mosques are not safe. The whole atmosphere of Mir Ali is filled with misery, dejection, isolation and disappointment. Above all, fear prevails in the whole novel. The lives of terrorism-stricken people have been shown in the novel. Mir Ali is torn with conflicts. There is injustice in Mir Ali. The sufferings of the younger and older generations are the same. No one could succeed to bring change. Rich and authoritative people are safe while the lives of

common masses are in danger. People failed to bring change and to improve the situation of Mir Ali, so some of them escaped that area like Aman Erum did. Some people turned into rebellions like Samarra and Hayat. Some people remained there in Mir Ali living their miserable lives.

In the novel *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, writer has portrayed women by negating the stereotypical notion about women. A stereotype is an assumption about a particular group of people. Gender stereotypes are the presumptions about males and females. According to gender stereotypes, men are considered to be free, independent, courageous, emotionally strong. They are at the top of social hierarchy and enjoying supreme position. While women have been considered as subservient, weak, submissive, delicate, emotionally weak and dependent upon men for their survival. They are generally looked down upon and are considered as inferior beings. They are usually seen as incompetent and deficient in their capacities. In the present work, women have been shown more courageous and braver as compared to men. They are ready to meet their fates. They never give up. They did not forget their sufferings. They had the courage to fight with the difficult circumstances.

### Literature Review

The portrayal of women in Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) has garnered scholarly attention for its subversion of traditional gender stereotypes within Pakistan's patriarchal and conflict-ridden society. Drawing on feminist frameworks, researchers emphasize how the novel challenges the depiction of women as passive, submissive, and dependent, instead presenting them as resilient agents of resistance amid terrorism and oppression in Mir Ali, a fictionalized representation of Waziristan.

Zaidi, Sahibzada, and Farooq (2022) apply Lois Tyson's feminist criticism (2006) and Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination (2000) to analyze the novel alongside other Pakistani works. They argue that Bhutto deconstructs power-based gender roles, portraying women like Samarra and Mina as embodying valor typically reserved for men. Samarra's engagement in militant activities wearing jeans, riding motorcycles, and leading insurgent plots subverts stereotypes of domesticated women: "She hadn't told a soul about her second, clandestine, non-house-girl life" (Bhutto, 2013, p. 146). Collins' framework highlights intersecting oppressions of gender, class, and ethnicity, where women resist systemic domination through individual agency. The authors note limited prior research on the novel, citing Jadoon et al. (2018) for its psychological portrayal of war victims and Siddique (2020) for Foucauldian deconstruction of colonial stereotypes, adding that Bhutto's characters destabilize hegemonic identities in Pashtun tribal systems.

Similarly, Zaidi et al. (2022) in *Phil Papers* underscore the novel's role in contemporary Pakistani literature by women writers, who use narratives to empower female characters against socio-cultural constraints. They describe Samarra's transformation from a betrayed lover to a defiant rebel, confronting authorities: "You are the ones who have sold everything in this country you defend so urgently" (Bhutto, 2013, p. 150), and Mina's bold defiance of Taliban militants, pushing against conventions despite grief over her son's death. This

subversion aligns with broader feminist goals of dismantling patriarchal norms, where gender is a social construct open to literary reconfiguration.

Shah and Asghar (2023) frame the novel through Althusserian repression and resistance, portraying women as central to challenging state and Taliban narratives. Samarra emerges as a militant leader post-torture, rejecting passivity: "Samarra has spent a life lying in wait. She will not hide anymore" (Bhutto, 2013, p. 14), while Mina's ideological defiance amid trauma highlights psychological resilience. They critique conventional depictions of Third World women as voiceless, noting Bhutto amplifies their agency in FATA's marginalized context, countering media distortions.

Lamichhane (2017), cited across studies, praises Bhutto's "beautiful portrayal" of Samarra and Mina as powerful seekers of education and enlightenment despite suffering, subverting cultural hegemony. Siddique (2020) links this to postcolonial parameters, where women's boldness reflects real-world resistance.

Overall, scholarship converges on Bhutto's feminist intervention, using characters to negate stereotypes of emotional fragility and subservience, instead emphasizing bravery, independence, and intersectional empowerment in a war-torn patriarchal landscape. Gaps remain in comparative analyses with global feminist literature, suggesting avenues for future research.

### **Delimitation of the Research**

The analysis is concerned only with two female characters in the novel. The characters of Samarra and Mina have been analyzed to support the claim that the anti-stereotypical women have been portrayed in this novel.

### **Objective**

- 1) To expose the manner in which gender stereotypes have been negated in the novel.

### **Research Question**

- 1) How does the character portrayal present the anti-stereotypical image of women?

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in feminist literary criticism to examine the anti-stereotypical portrayal of women in Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013). The approach is interpretive and textual, drawing on Lois Tyson's (2006) framework of feminist criticism, which interrogates gender roles, power dynamics, and the subversion of patriarchal stereotypes. Additionally, Patricia Hill Collins' (2004) Matrix of Domination is integrated as a theoretical lens to analyze how gender intersects with social, political, and cultural oppressions in a conflict-ridden Pakistani context, emphasizing women's agency and resistance. The research is delimited to a close reading of two key female characters Samarra and Mina selected purposively for their representation of resilience, bravery, and independence, which challenge traditional gender stereotypes of women as submissive and dependent. Data collection involves extracting relevant textual excerpts, dialogues, and narrative descriptions from the novel that highlight these characters' actions, emotions, and interactions. Analysis proceeds through thematic coding and comparative

examination: (1) Identifying stereotypical gender assumptions (e.g., emotional weakness, subservience); (2) Contrasting these with the characters' anti-stereotypical traits (e.g., Samarra's rebellious activities and Mina's confrontation with militants); and (3) Interpreting how such portrayals subvert patriarchal norms amid terrorism and societal constraints. This method ensures a nuanced deconstruction of gender as a social construct, supported by interdisciplinary insights from sociology and psychology. Ethical considerations include accurate representation of the text without imposing external biases. The study addresses the research question: How does character portrayal present an anti-stereotypical image of women? through evidence-based argumentation.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of two female characters has shown that how the anti-stereotypical notion has been presented in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*.

Samarra, a twelve years old girl is introduced in the novel. She has been ascribed such attributes that broke the stereotypical image of women as being submissive, dependent upon men and so on. She wore jeans and played cricket and rode horses and shot pellet guns. Samarra rode the motor bike. She did everything and anything she had seen her father do. She accompanied her father Ghazan Afridi, whenever he went on fishing in the icy streams of northern valleys. She was a brave girl. She possessed adventurous mind. She wanted to do every new thing in her life that was not allowed for women.

Samarra idolized her father. Samarra had a deep and closer relationship with her father. She spent most of the time in the company of her father and idealized him. She always tried to follow his footsteps. When she reached the age of seventeen, her father left her and her mother Malalai. He went out of Mir Ali without informing them that where he will go and when he will come back. He left his only daughter and his wife alone in Mir Ali. They used to wait for him but they never lose courage and fought with their critical circumstances bravely. Malalai used to sew, to teach and to cook to earn their livelihood. Samarra always consoled her mother and encouraged her to be strong. They both lived their lives and proved that they could survive without the male member of their family. Samarra would stop at matric. Tenth-grade education was considered to be more than enough for a seventeen years old girl. She had been faced with denial to education. But

She never complained and fought hard. At this age, society expected her to get married and to live and serve people at her husband's home. But Samarra did not complain and continued her education while staying at home. She stayed at home and read second-hand books. Her passion compelled her elders to let her continue her education and allowed her to attend the local university and she was supposed to stop her education after a bachelor's degree. On her trip to Chitral, at the age of twelve, she met with Aman Erum and they both fell in love with each other. With time their relationship grew deeper. During their stay at fishing camps, they used to sneak out of their father's tents and used to wander in the valleys. Once Aman slipped and cut his hand on the rocks by the bank. Samarra took his hand in hers and squeezed out the blood. Samarra helped Aman in getting rid of the bad blood that would infect his body.

Aman was suffering from unbearable pain and depended upon Samarra at that time. She did not get afraid and tried her best to comfort him. It is said that women are emotionally weak but Samarra was strong enough that she helped Aman in that time. Aman had no social circle. He had no friends of his own in Mir Ali. He knew people but he interacted with the world through her. In order to interact with people, Aman took help from Samarra. She was socially more active and was more aware of her surroundings as compared to Aman. In other words, it can be said that Aman's feet were in Samarra's shoes.

Aman Erum wanted to go abroad for the better future which was not possible in Mir Ali. When he was leaving for US, she kept her wishes to herself. Samarra did not reveal her thoughts to him due to her inner strength. After his settlement in US, Aman used to make calls to her and write letters. Samarra used to wait for his arrival and frequently asked him questions like When are you going to come back home?

Aman shared his experiences with Samarra. He told her about his studies, his friends. He shared the differences which he felt at that place. He shared the life style of the inhabitants of that place. Samarra was kidnapped by a group of some militants. She was walking home in the afternoon and a car stopped in front of her. She had been lifted off the ground.

Samarra did not scream. She did not utter a word. Usually, it is assumed that women are coward in the hours of danger and that they cannot cope with such situations but Samarra's reaction in such situation negated this stereotypical assumption about women. She showed her strength by remaining silent rather than screaming. She had been brutally tortured by one of the kidnappers. She bravely confronted him and answered him that *It is not your country. You are not fit for it.* She argued with them and said that *I know who you are. You sold its skies. Who are you to sell the sky?* She did not give up in front of that person. Her right ear was hit so brutally that she was deaf by her right ear. She was so brave that *she closed her eyes in preparation for more strike.* While she was beaten by the army man, she promised herself that *she would not cry.* Those seven hours were the darkest moments of her life. When she was released, she was torn physically and spiritually. She called Aman and tried to tell him about the incident, when Aman came to know about the truth he dropped the phone. She was not expecting such behavior from Aman. His cold attitude showed her the other side of the picture. Aman's behavior badly torn her and led her to dejection but she gathered courage and was determined to fight back to prove her innocence.

*When they released her, she did not speak of what they did or what hands had been laid upon her.* She fought back to prove her innocence. She fought back on *behalf of her father.* This shows how strong she was. She intended to revenge, to fight on behalf of her father who left her alone to meet her fate. Rather than giving up and accepting that incident as her destiny, she fought back to prove that she is not weak and cannot be defeated just because she is alone without her father. The life miseries had so changed Samarra that she did not share her grief even with her mother, who was the only person in her life to stood by her through thick and thin. *Samarra hadn't told her anything about what had happened.* She tolerated all the pains by herself. She did not cry. She would not place those seven hours of her life. She wished to place them

behind. She wanted to forget those terrible seven hours of her life but it was not possible because those seven hours played a vital role in bringing change in her life *She had hardened. She became too ambitious.*

Samarra had changed in many ways. She never became afraid of anything. For her there was nothing to be afraid of. This time she had risen with precautions. There was no one Samarra loved enough to protect from the consequences of her actions. She had loosened all those attachments. She never suspected this was a battle she could not win. Samarra started to act against the social standards set against women. She left her hair open all the time. She used to ride motor bike sitting behind Hayat, the youngest brother of Aman. Hayat and Samarra met in the university and they both had the same ambition and were the part of the secret plan to kill Chief Minister. Hayat guided her that it was not suitable for her to touch him in public but *Samarra ignores him, resting her cheeks on his back as he drives.* Samarra started smoking that is a sort of taboo for women especially at such a place as Mir Ali was. *Women don't smoke in public places; she is breaking the form.* She smokes in the university without any fear. She did not care for any norm, for any restriction being imposed upon her from society. She was not a rebel against her country but she had adopted rebellious attitude towards the societal norms that women are weak and cannot survive without men. Samarra had become so brave that she did not hide her face from the fear of being recognized. Hayat often told her: *It's dangerous what you do not cover your head. They recognize you.* But Samarra did not care. She spent her life lying in wait. She decided that she will not hide her anymore. She was the leading figure in the battle of Mir Ali. She was guiding the two boys Nasir and Hayat that how to carry out the plan in order to kill the Chief Minister. She alone bore many hardships in her life. First her father left her and later on her love, her to be life partner left her. But she did not give up and continued her struggle. She survived those difficult times without the help from anyone. She alone fought her battle and broke the stereotypical image of women.

Mina, second anti-stereotypical female, was lecturer at the department of psychology in the university of Mir Ali. She along with her husband Sikandar and their only son Zalan, was living a prosperous life. She was living a normal life, doing job, making her husband happy and above all bringing up her son who was six years old. As Zalan was the only son of his parents, he got too much attention and love from them. He spent the most part of the summer with his mother.

*Singing songs with her in the car, keeping her keys safe in his pockets whenever they left the home.* He used to brush her hair. He accompanied her on her shopping trips. Zalan had a great attachment with his father. Whenever Sikandar sat for talking to his brothers, Zalan brought his books and pencils and put them at Sikandar's feet to get attention. If Sikandar rose to do some tasks, then Zalan would close his books and followed his father. His birthday present was bubblegummers. He liked them a lot. He wore them even in bed. He used to sleep in his father's lap.

*It was Sikandar who put Zalan to bed with a short story and three kisses, one for good luck.*

Sikandar was a doctor at Hasan Faraz Government hospital. One day Zalan's school was off and he went to hospital to visit his father. On that day a car exploded in the parking lot of hospital. Many people died and one of them was Zalan. Sikandar rushed to search for his son with the hope that he will be safe but Sikandar found the bubblegummers with their lights flashing and the dead body was lying on the floor. Sikandar and Mina could not bear the loss. This terrible incident completely destroyed both of them. They found their lives wretched. After Zalan's death they never found any happiness in their lives. Sikandar started working for the sake of charity. Mina was no fonder of life. Before that incident, she was a lively girl. She was fond of music but she left all previous activities. *Her nails were no longer polished. She did not think about things like that now. She wore just a rim of gun-black kohl round her eyes.*

Mina did not look like, nor dress like, nor carry and semblance of the woman she had always been. She transformed herself between funerals. She had no other outlets during the day. She had decided not to return to the university. *She stored and saved newspapers for weeks and months.* Mina daily read the newspapers. The floor of her room was covered with newspapers. She used to find the news of the death of someone's son and went to attend the funerals. *To look for her grief in the lines of other mother's faces, to search for her son amongst other boys taken too soon.* Mina believed that Zalan could have been saved but many people were there who did not come to the call of moaning Zalan. The hatred and the searching anger robbed her of her calm.

On Eid day Mina escaped from her house to attend the funeral of a young boy. The family of the dead boy called Sikandar to come to remove his wife from their house. Sikandar reached that house and took Mina with him. On their way home, Sikandar had to go to the hospital to take the round of the wards to examine the patients. A lady doctor insisted Sikandar to go to a far-off place in the jungle to deal with the delivery case. Initially he resisted but later on he agreed to go to the spot and decided to take Mina with him because people living in such forests wouldn't allow a male doctor even in the case of emergency.

*But Mina's presence can make a difference* Sikandar depended upon Mina for his acceptance in such situation. On their way to forest, they had been attacked by a group of three Talibs. *The man standing by Mina's window points his gun at her face.* Second Talib stood at the front of their van and third one stood by Sikandar's window. They inquired Sikandar harshly. *He is unused to violence. He begins speaking softly and lowering his shoulders.* He's heard around the hospital that the militants seek out doctors. On being asked, he told them that he is a driver and the lady was a doctor. He was there to accompany her. This statement shows how coward he was. Mina stared at him. The three Talibs saw how her face fell as the man spoke, how she followed every turn of his speech and how she opened her mouth to speak several words. Talibs did not speak to her. They were continuously talking to Sikandar but Mina tried to interrupt them by requesting them to let them go but they ignored her.

Unlike Sikandar who was hiding himself from Talibs, Mina was sitting upright and neither lowered her eyes nor her head. She asked Sikandar that what he was doing to get them out of that. He could not answer. He was so afraid of Talibs that he could not open his lips properly

to speak to Mina. he said to Mina *I am sorry*, she closed her ears to him. Sikandar was being continuously inquired by the Talibs. They asked him questions like: *Are you a Muslim? You are a man of faith?* Sikandar did not want to confront them rather he tried to make them happy and to escape from them. In order to do that he quickly answered them *Yes, yes, of course. I am driving the doctor to the village where she is needed and then I will be returning for my prayers.* Mina was in anger and was trying to control her anger. Sikandar was justifying his position as a religious person but he could not utter whole sentences because of Mina's glare at him which revealed his cowardness.

*She knows he is a coward.* When Talibs came to ask him about his sect: *Are you a Sunni or a Shia?* He became more afraid and pleaded them to let him go. *Brother, I am just a Muslim. Please let me go.* He begged for release. He hid his faith for the sake of release. While Mina's faith was rising inside her that was shown through her movements. *Mina beats her chest, her heart with her open palm.* Mina never lied for protection and has never hidden her faith as Sikandar did. Mina revealed it to Talibs through her gestures that she is Shia. This shows her bravery whereas Sikandar was continuously hiding his faith and sect. he asked Mina for help. *Sikandar gestures to Mina. I can't please.*

After further investigation, Talibs started beating Sikandar and called him *Kafir*. Sikandar was silently bearing that torture but Mina could not control herself anymore. She attacked Talibs. Sikandar bore the violence patiently but Mina was full of anger and hatred towards these Talibs so she attacked them.

*Mina opened her door and pushed the Talib.* She pushed him hard, touching him against all conventions. She knocked him to the ground and out of her way. When Talib tried to stop her, she screamed at him *Zalim and Unjust.* Talib hold his weapon between him and her to keep a barrier between them but she beat through it. Talib tried to speak, to tell her of her place but nothing could reach Mina. She was so furious that she forgot that she was in which situation and that she was quarrelling with people who had weapons in their hands. She was fearless at that time and was just talking to Talibs about their deeds. She spoke about her son. *Your men took him from us. He had not done anything. He had not even begun to live.* Mina told them that they had killed her son. He was innocent. He did not commit any crime. He was unaware of that brutality with which he suffered. She bluntly asked them: *Do you have any shame in the face of the mothers you have robbed of their boys?* During all this time Sikandar lied on his seat, dared not even to move just from the fear of Talibs whereas his wife was all alone quarrelling with them. It was Mina who was fighting for their son who was killed unjustly but Sikandar could not dare to speak in front of Talibs. *Mina was in tears, shouting for their boy. Sikandar whispers from his seat, Mina, what are you doing?* Mina looked at him angrily. She described that horrible day when their son was killed but Sikandar just whispered from the car to stop Mina. One of the Talib hit her with the gun and asked her to shut her mouth and get into the van but she caught the gun and pushed it back into the Talib. She screamed *Beghairat*. She called them bastards. A Talib opened his mouth to say her something but she screamed at him.



*Shut up! I don't want to hear your voice.* Sikandar moved out of the van and after great trial succeed in taking her to the van. The Talib softened his stance and let the gun fell by his side.

### Conclusion

Samarra and Mina, both suffered from injustices. They both sacrificed a lot. They are the symbol of courage and determination. Despite being physically violated, Samarra did not give up and tried to prove her innocence. She lived without her father who left her without any reason. She fought alone on behalf of her missing father. There were two men in her life whom she loved a lot and upon whom she was dependent. One was her father and the other was Aman. Both of them left her but she did not lose hope and proved that a woman can survive without a man.

Mina lost her son. She was spiritually torn. There was nothing left in her life. Her life was completely changed. People called her crazy and mad. But when the time came, she proved that she was not mad. Usually, it is assumed that women are less competent as compared to men but Mina's personality was against this assumption. She became the strength of her husband. She accompanied him to the forest to cure a patient. On their way to the forest, they were attacked by Talibs. Sikandar was afraid. He could not dare to speak before them but Mina gathered courage and strength and she even attacked Talibs who were having weapons in their hands. A time came when she was the leading figure and was circling three Talibs and only she was speaking while all men were listening her. Her words brought shame to Talibs. Through these two characters, the novelist tried to show that women are not submissive, they are not weak and less competent as compared to men. They can fight in hard times even better than men.

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