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**Decoding *The Holy Woman*: A Reader Response Approach to
Subjective Meaning Making**



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Abstract

This research article aims to analyze the novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Sharaz through the lens of reader response theory by Frank Rosenblatt. The research is entirely qualitative. Different journals and articles related to reader response theory on this novel have been analyzed, judged and evaluated by the researcher and then finally concluded into a separate format. Reader Response Theory basically centralizes the role of the reader in creating the meaning of the text. After writing any literary work, there is no authority of the author to impose a fixed meaning upon the minds of the readers. Everybody has different interpretations, imaginations, experiences and opinions after reading this novel. This creates an aesthetic effect by combining the responses and standpoints of different readers. The novel has been analyzed through modern, psychological, feminist, traditional and western readers' perspectives. It conveys the idea that readers who belong to different cultural backgrounds interpret the novel through their own lens. Through this way, any literary work can have various interpretations.

Keywords: Feminism, tradition, psychology, readers, meanings, interpretations

Introduction

Background of the Study

Reading plays an important role in understanding literature. The more a person reads, the more he or she is capable of developing a strong understanding of the text. Reading does not only indicate to get an idea of the words or just passing through the surface meaning of any text but it includes emotions, feelings, imaginations, experience of the readers and their perceptions. When the reader starts reading the novel, drama or any other literary work, he or she is solely dependent upon the intentions of the author who creates or writes the text. This somewhat confines the reader to stay in the arena of the author's dimensions and opinions about the text. Few interpretations and meanings are derived within the literary work.

Now overtime, the focus has entirely been shifted from the author's intentions to the reader's active participation in creating the meaning of the text. Meaning is deduced differently by different readers who read the text. The new approach laid the

foundation of reading the text named Reader Response Theory postulated by Rosenblatt in 1978. It focuses on the response of the reader in meaning making rather than on the author's perceptions or the structure of the text itself. According to Rosenblatt, readers play a pivotal role because they actively engage themselves into the text and bring their experiences and emotions alive. Each reader interprets the text in his/her own subjective ways.

This study aims to analyze the novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Sheraz (a story of beautiful young Pakistani girl of 28 years old who goes through a complete transformation from a bold, attractive, educated and modern girl to a religious woman who for the sake of her family culture, rules and regulations becomes the holy woman) through the lens of Reader Response Theory to explore and examine its diverse cultural background, emotional reactions this novel evokes into the readers and how the themes and gender norms have been interpreted and constructed differently by different readers.

Significance of the Study

Importance of the Role of Readers in Meaning Making

First of all, this study brings the readers to the center of doing the literary analysis of this novel. Moreover, instead of having only one interpretation of the novel, readers can welcome and derive multiple meanings within the text. More explicit meanings can be extracted from this novel.

Tompkins (1980) claims that reader response theory has strongly challenged the literary work interpretation as fixed, confined and same as dependent upon the author. This theory has uniquely offered various explanations based on the personal responses of the readers.

For Students and Literary Scholars

For different students and scholars, this research highlights the importance of various meanings, dimensions and perspectives from different readers of this novel based on their experiences, emotions, imaginations, life, opinions and feelings. Furthermore, it offers dynamic ways of analyzing the text by the readers belonging to different social backgrounds. Instead of looking at this novel from feminist point of view, a more personal and deep emotional response can be welcomed by the readers' standpoints.

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For General Readers

For all the general readers who loves reading books of different genres, this study can really benefit them to explore their inner consciousness, trauma, memories, life experiences through this novel. Some readers become more empathetic and aware after reading another person's interpretation. They become more connected through this bond.

Problem Statement

In accordance with this theory, there is a critical gap of a proper reader's interpretation of this text. How the readers' mindset and reading of this novel affect their own social norms, gender, faith and cultural identity? This novel has been interpreted and explained through many theories like feminism, post colonialism yet this outlook (reader response theory) has been unexplored. This study offers a sound interpretation of this novel through the eyes of the readers only excluding other considerations.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research study are as follows:

1. To examine how individual reader derives subjective meanings while reading Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman*.
2. To analyze the impact of different readers' social background on the interpretation of the text.
3. To scrutinize different themes, characters and symbols in *The Holy Woman* that stimulate different emotional and cultural responses among the readers.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How individual reader derives subjective meanings while reading Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman*?
2. What are the impacts of different readers' social background on the interpretation of the text?
3. How different themes, characters and symbols in the novel stimulate different emotional and cultural responses among the readers?

Research Gap

Despite the importance and impact of this theory in literary analyses and studies, there is no vast research examining the role of the readers in creating different meanings of

this text. Moreover, there is no evidence about how this framework has been applied on this novel. This thing created a dominating gap in this study. This study is particularly focused on filling this gap. This novel has been interpreted only through the lens of feminism. Nothing has been found on this novel's connection with the actual life experiences of the readers.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is limited to *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz excluding other works of this author. It uses Reader Response Theory to subject meaning making rather than analyzing it through postcolonial feminist, structuralism or post structuralism. Moreover, it is limited to the students, female readers or those who belong to different cultural backgrounds.

Organization of this Study

The entire research study has been organized into four chapters. Chapter first is the Introduction. It covers the background the study, significance of the study, problem statement, research objectives, questions and gap. Chapter second is the Literature Review. It covers the reviews of relevant literature on this topic. Chapter third is the Research Methodology. It includes the framework, method of data collection and analysis. Chapter four is the analysis of the entire study. Last are the references.

Literature Review

Here are the important standpoints, opinions and reviews of scholars, critics and author about reader response theory and its implications on different literary works (novels).

Barthes (1967) shares his opinions about *The Death of the Author* by saying that when the author writes his literary work then automatically, he dies, there is no control of his intentions or interpretations on his text. The authority automatically goes to the readers. They derive meanings according to their own perceptions and understanding of the text.

Bleich (1978) highlights the responses of the readers while interpreting the text. He says that a reader is the author of the text because meanings emerge entirely from his own imaginations, interpretations and evaluations. He controls everything in the text.

Habib (2016) claims the idea that reader response analysis can strip away the original

meaning of the text, exclude author's intentions and interpretations. How can the readers find the original validity of the text. Readers can evaluate any meaning within the text that might be true or not.

Mambrol (2016) says that reader response theory shifts the attention from the author's intention to the connection between the reader and the text. A text does not carry a fixed meaning. It can be studied through various interpretations and angles. Readers hold the central authority to derive various meanings out of the text.

According to Saeed & Khan (2017), Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) overlooks the character of Zarri Bano shaped by culture, politics and various institutions. If the readers are already aware of this fact, then they view this setting and tradition with skepticism and doubts or on the flip side, accept it as totally inevitable (unavoidable) in culture.

According to the perceptions of İnan and Boldan (2018), this Reader Response Theory was effective in the classroom where all the students analyzed the assignment given to them by their teachers. Initially, their responses were objective but then their understanding was shifted from factual to more aesthetic and subjective. It helps them to actively engage with their topic more personally and deeply.

In regarding with this, Spirovska (2019) says that Reader Response Theory is very effective in creating rich meaning making practice. It can help teachers to become sound and reflective readers who are on the verge of their developing career. Moreover, those students who learn English as a foreign language can interpret and improve various literary comprehensions by adopting this technique.

Clement John et al. (2023) postulate the idea that Zarri Bano's beauty is also involved in this novel. Her beauty has literally been objectified in this novel. The responses of the readers can change depending upon their interpretations. Some may call it male gaze or some may call it so called tradition in their culture.

Neis et al. (2023) points out the readers' eye movement while reading the text. These movements while reading actively engages with the response and the imaginations that the readers create in their minds. This engagement with the text is strongly individualized and personal.

Mughal, Chandio, and Javed (2024) conducted this theory on different students in the classroom. The text was *Waiting for Godot* and all the students have to analyze that

text. Results showed that 40 percent students were positive about this text while another 60 percent students were negative. Their responses were highly welcomed and appreciated by the teacher. Every student went beyond the surface meaning in order to have their own individual interpretations.

On the other hand, Saeed et al. (2024) is of the view that the main character Zarri Bano in the novel *The Holy Woman* is constructed by patriarchal norms and regulations. Her abaya and veil are the symbols that represent something along with “honor” and “holy woman”. Reader Response Theory can surely reject or accept such make up rules and traditions made by patriarchal society and culture. It solely depends on them.

On Wikipedia (2025), Reader Response Theory brings the reader actively engage with the text and they also bring their experiences into dialogues within the text. All together they dynamically construct the entire meaning. Moreover, the gaps in the text give sparks to the readers to actively fill in the meanings that they imagine into their minds. They invent different meanings and give new meanings to the text every time they read.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The entire study revolves around Reader Response Criticism particularly on *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz. The basic key aspects are subjective reading, authority of the reader in controlling the interpretation of the text and how meaning lies interdependent upon the reader and the text as well.

Research Designs

The study is entirely qualitative and interpretive. The novel and the reader serve as primary data while scholarly articles serve as secondary data.

Primary Data

The primary text is the novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz. Only selected passages and lines have been highlighted so that they can be interpreted and explained through reader response theory (criticism).

Secondary Data

Read different opinions, articles and standpoints on this novel regarding feminism, feudalism, patriarchal norms and regulations, religious and cultural tradition.

Method of Data Collection

This research study requires two methods of data collection:

- Self-Reading which includes critical thinking (making own notes)
- Participants or others' articles, opinions and judgements on this novel

Method of Data Analysis

Analyzing the data through mixed responses both from self-reading and going through others' research articles on this novel (studying through various angles and interpretations). Rosenblatt's Reader Response theory has been the source of interpreting and analyzing this novel.

Analysis

Brief Summar

Qaisra Shahraz, a British- Pakistani novelist describes a story about Zarri Bano, a beautiful young educated lady of 28 years old who undergoes a spiritual transformation from a modern, fashionable lady to a simple, modest and religious holy woman. In the opening scenes, she falls in loves with a man named Sikandar but does not get marry to him because of the sudden death of Zarri Bano and Ruby's only brother. After this excruciating incident, she was forced to adopt a holy appearance by wearing abayas and covering herself in hijab. Later on, her little sister Ruby gets married to Sikandar who bores one child (son) to him. On Haj pilgrimage, Ruby dies because of the sudden panic among large number of people, she gets a heart attack and passes away. The child who gets attached with Zarri Bano, ultimately becomes the source of their connection and renewal of Sikander and Zarri Bano. They get united at the end.

Now after reading this novel, there are different reactions and opinions of the readers.

Readers with Feminist Perspective

From feminist perspective, it is said that her lack of choice in making her own decisions despite of being educated and modern depict the dictation and control of her destiny and fate.

"She was to be a bride, but not of a mortal man. Her wedding was to be with God." (Shahraz, *Holy Woman*, p. 87).

This line surely depicts the role of women in society and how women succumb to the desires and decisions of patriarchy. Another textual evidence about the struggles, pain,

troubles and sufferings of Zarri Bano is given below:

"She was a prisoner in a robe they called holy." (Ch. 12)

Unaware about the fate, happiness and consent of Zarri Bano, her father says:

A Holy Woman's prayers reach heaven faster." (Ch. 9)

It suggests pathetic and heart wrenching situation and feelings that Zarri Bano goes through in her life.

Readers who Strongly Follows Their Traditions and Norms:

Those readers who are strongly attached with their culture and traditions overlook the character of Zarri Bani as someone who is noble, chaste and pure. Her sacrifice was spiritual. Such kind of women totally win the hearts of her parents as well as seeks Allah's blessings and fortune everywhere.

"A daughter's obedience is her ticket to Paradise." (Ch. 5)

Readers with Modern Perspective

Readers with modern views and perspectives view her character as suppressed as well as oppressed. She does not have any authority to live her own life and still follows the rules and regulations made by men. Modern readers view her as someone upon whom one can only show mercy. She was entirely fragmented in her oppressed structure.

"Zarri Bano stood before the mirror, touching the holy robe. The woman staring back was a stranger—a saint carved out of her father's dreams, not her own." (Ch. 12)

This is the depiction of stupidity and violence in the shape of her holy appearance and not an actual woman with her own desires and dreams.

Readers with Psychological Perspective

Zarri Bano on one hand, behaved properly in her new transformation but on the other hand, she was mentally unwell, she was all alone with no one who can console her. She was consecutively fighting with her inner demons. Her personality was divided into two parts. Her persona was a holy woman, a chaste and pure woman in both head and heart but her shadow part was also visible that only she knew it so well. Here is textual evidence:

"She split herself in two—the saint for them, the woman for herself." (Ch. 14)

Western Readers

Western readers see her character as someone whose rights have been violated by patriarchal norms. This shows cultural backwardness and sick mentality as well. Here

is a line from the text:

They called it devotion. She called it slow death." (Ch. 20)

Analysis of the Characters

Zarri Bano

Victim of Patriarchal Society and Rules

Some readers sympathize with her character and depicts her as a victim of patriarchal society because she loses her love, dreams and the life she imagines.

Symbol of Strength and Courage

Some readers find her as a symbol of strength and courage because despite of fighting with her inner self, sooner or later she consoles herself and adapts herself into the situation.

She draped the holy robe over her shoulders with steady hands. If this was her fate, she would wear it like a queen wears her crown—not as a chain, but as a choice." (Ch. 10)

Test of Devotion and Faith

Some readers view her spiritual journey as a test of her faith and devotion because surrendering to Allah's will is supreme and rewards at the end are uncountable.

Sikander

Tragic Figure

Readers are of the opinion that he is a tragic figure because he was entirely helpless and heartbroken. When Zarri Bano refuses his proposal, his world was shattered.

'It cannot be true,' Sikander whispered, clutching the letter that tore his future apart. His hands shook as if the paper were aflame." (Ch. 7)

Unable to take a stand for himself and Zarri Bano

He is a character who was unable to take a stand for himself as well as Zarri Bano, he does not do anything but instead he just lets it (Her marriage to Quran) happen quietly.

'I will fight this!' he roared to the empty sky. But the village elders turned away, and his fists unclenched—because whom could he fight? God? (Ch. 9)

Zarri Bano's Father

A Great Oppressor

Some readers are of the standpoints that Zarri Bano's father was cruel and the one who in a true sense an oppressor. He does not care for her daughter's happiness but

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prioritizes his religious rules, dogmas and traditions.

Allah has chosen you, Zarri Bano. From this day, you are Shahzadi Ibadat—a bride of God. Your flesh, your dreams, your breath belong to Him now. 'His voice left no room for her tears.' (Ch. 6).

Now this clearly defines his authority over his daughter, his order and claim totally deny her humanity and feelings.

Another line, that further aggravates his tyranny:

When she fell to her knees begging, he turned his face away. 'Would you defy Allah's will?' he thundered. 'Or are you so weak?'" (Ch. 8)

As Asma Barlas (2002) in her work "*Believing Women*" argues that Islam does not permit enforced patriarchy, instead, the cultural traditions do so.

Symbols and Interpretations of the Readers

Wedding Dress Versus Holy Robe or Attire (Burqa)

Her black Holy dress symbolizes loss of romantic moments and embracing a new world of spirituality, the path of blessings, instructions and guidance. This black color also symbolizes loss of mundane happiness and colorful life.

The Locked Drawer that contained Sikander's Letters

The drawer that she locked, contained the letters from Sikander. It symbolizes her nostalgic past, forbidden memories, resistance and broken heart. Here is textual evidence:

Beneath her prayer rug, the letters pulsed like a second heart." (Ch. 19)

In one way or another, she was dying for returning back to her original life where she was completely happy and satisfied.

The Rosebush

The rose bush symbolizes her condition. Roses that were beautiful but still confined to their limitations and surrounded by thorns. Here is textual evidence:

She watered the roses daily, but they withered anyway—like a girl forced to thrive without sunlight." (Ch. 13)

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