

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**Unveiling The Masks Of Emotional Labor: A Critical Exploration Of
Women Emotional Wellbeing In Abbas's The Empty Room**



Kashf Fatima

MPhil Scholar, Department of English Language and
Literature, University of Sargodha
Email: shaanshaa60@gmail.com

Dr. Zareena Qasim

Associate Professor, Department of English Language and
Literature, University of Sargodha
Email: zareenaqasim@uos.edu.pk

Abstract

This paper presents a critical exploration of women's emotional wellbeing in Abbas's novel *The Empty Room*. Through a detailed analysis of the protagonist's emotional struggles, the research reveals the intricate web of societal expectations, cultural norms, and personal relationships that shape women's emotional experiences in Pakistani society. While examining the protagonist's emotional experiences, the study focuses on the ways in which she performs emotional labor, highlighting the tension between her authentic emotions and the emotions she is expected to perform in different situations of her life. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor as propounded in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983), the analysis is organized around the key theme of the performance of emotional labor, a kind of dissimulation discussed by Francis Bacon, which the protagonist is expected to perform in her daily life, at all moments and in all situations. Through a close reading of the novel, this research demonstrates how Abbas's work offers close insight into the ways women perform emotional labor and provides a powerful critique of the societal and cultural factors that contribute to their emotional distress. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence women's emotional wellbeing in Pakistani society. The study highlights the need for greater emotional support, solidarity, and feminist resistance, and demonstrates the value of literary analysis in understanding the complexities of human emotions and experiences.

Keywords: Emotional Labor, Patriarchy, Expectations, Autonomy, Resistance

Introduction

In the intricate web of societal expectations and patriarchal norms, woman's emotional wellbeing often hangs in the balance. The concept of Emotional Labor, coined by Arlie Hochschild, sheds light on the ways individuals manage their emotions to meet external demands. This phenomenon is particularly relevant for women, who are often socialized to prioritize others' emotions over their own. Abbas's novel, *The Empty Room*, offers a thought-provoking exploration of this concept, inviting readers to examine the complexities of woman's emotional experiences. Through the protagonist's journey, Abbas masterfully illustrates the ways emotional labor can shape woman's wellbeing, relationships, and sense of self. This analysis, "Unveiling the Masks of Emotional Labor", will delve into the ways woman's emotional labor is performed, critiquing the power structures that perpetuate these expectations and exploring the emotional costs of conforming to societal norms.

By examining the intersections of emotional labor, patriarchy, and woman's emotional wellbeing, this analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of woman's lives. Research has shown that emotional labor can have profound effects on individuals' emotional wellbeing, particularly for women, who are often socialized to prioritize others' emotions over their own. Studies have highlighted the ways emotional labor can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

In the context of women's lives, emotional labor can also perpetuate patriarchal norms, reinforcing the notion that women's emotions are secondary to men's needs and

desires. Feminist scholars have critiqued the ways societal expectations place undue burdens on women, requiring them to perform emotional labor to maintain social harmony. This performance can lead to feelings of unauthenticity, anxiety, and depression. Abbas's novel provides a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of emotional labor and its impact on woman's emotional wellbeing. Through a critical analysis of the protagonist's experiences, this exploration aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on emotional labor and woman's wellbeing.

Background of the study

Emotional Labor, it is a concept that is introduced by Arlie Hochschild in *The Managed Heart* (1983). It refers to the process of managing and controlling one's emotions to truly meet a societal expectation. This is especially true in situations where specific feelings must be shown to others, and humans are not allowed to show their authentic feelings.

Traditionally, emotional labor has been studied in the professional settings, especially in service and care jobs. These jobs employees are expected to show positive emotions even if they don't feel that particular way inside, even if their feelings are very different from what they are actually feeling.

In contrast, scholarly inquiry has acknowledged that emotional labor transcends the confines of professional environments, permeating domestic, familial, and social context, wherein women are disproportionately tasked with the management of emotional expressions (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Bolton & Boyd, 2003).

In societies with patriarchal structures such as Pakistan, women are often socialized to prioritize the emotional needs of others over their own. This is very evident in their roles as mothers, daughters, wives, and caregivers. These roles require constant emotional management, the suppression of personal feelings, and the performance of socially expected emotional displays, all of which can significantly affect mental health as well as physical health.

This is also evident in the role of women in social work, as well as in the role of women in social labor, as described by Gillian, (1982) and Oakley (1974), leads to stress, anxiety, and lower self-esteem, while also reinforcing gender inequalities and limiting personal freedom.

Despite its significance, the study of emotional labor in domestic and family settings has not been thoroughly explored in literary studies, particularly in South Asian literature. Abbas's (2015) novel, *The Empty Room*, provides a rich narrative for examining these dynamics. The story follows Tahira, a woman, ensnared in a stifling, male-dominated marriage. She is consistently and constantly maneuvering through her husband's shifting temperaments, juggling the demands of her running household and keeping and trying to keep the peace within her family. The novel, through its narrative, reveals the psychological and emotional consequences of emotional labor, highlighting both its buried, hidden nature and its widespread impact on women's well-being.

This study, through its examination of *The Empty Room*, seeks to address a significant inefficiency within South Asian literary scholarship, especially concerning the insufficient exploration of the psychological and emotional facets inherent in women's domestic and relational responsibilities. Further, this perspective enriches the ongoing dialogues concerning the emotional health of the women, the dynamics of gender work, and the capacity of relative endeavors to facilitate self-repair and personal

agency (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010; Van Lithe, Fenner, & Schofield, 2011).

Justification of Study

Despite the growing body of scholarship on emotional labor, feminist affect theory, and the role of art in therapeutic and creative self-expression, several critical gaps remain that the present study seeks to address. Firstly, while Arlie Hochschild's (1983) conceptualization of emotional labor has been extensively applied to service work and organizational settings, its application to domestic and intimate spheres within South Asian cultural contexts remains limited. Most existing studies focus on Western settings, where social and gender norms differ significantly from the patriarchal and moral codes embedded in Pakistani society. As a result, there is a lack of context-specific understanding of how patriarchal norms shape the performance, regulation, and psychic costs of women's emotional labor in households dominated by rigid hierarchies of gender, age, and authority. Abbas's *The Empty Room* offers a fertile literary site for exploring these dynamics, particularly through Tahira's experiences within a morally and socially prescribed domestic space.

Secondly, although feminist affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Illouz, 2007) emphasizes the social construction of emotions and their role in sustaining hierarchies of power, there is insufficient scholarship that directly connects these theoretical insights to literary analysis of contemporary South Asian fiction. Moreover, even the concept of emotional labor is being ill explored and poorly discussed in relation to women. This novel particularly, is being poorly explored through this particular lens, alongside other novels. Being an internationally sold novel, even it's hardly available in soft form (only can be purchased to read it), hence it adds up to its under-exploration and specially in this aspect.

Taken together, these gaps establish the original contribution of the present study: it bridges multiple disciplines to provide a detailed analysis of how women in patriarchal households navigate emotional labor, employ creative expression as a form of resistance, and reclaim their emotional and social agency. By situating Abbas's *The Empty Room* within both local and global theoretical frameworks, this research illuminates culturally specific manifestations of emotional labor while also engaging broader feminist debates about affect, autonomy, and creative self-realization.

Significance of study

The examination of emotional labor within Abbas's *The Empty Room* poses several damning social and cultural significance and yielding insights across various fields. This research primarily eliminates the often overlooked pre-advice or predicate on women's emotional labor in a domestic context. Although emotional labor has been thoroughly and widely investigated in professional settings, expert trial in literature, particularly within South Asian literature, has received comparatively little attention and hence demands a due and utmost attention.

This study highly addresses the deficiencies, showing how literature can offer profound understandings of women's lived emotional realities, particularly in societies where emotions are being highly suppressed and patriarchal norms govern their emotional self-expression and self-determination.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Research Aims and Objectives

This study endeavors to critically examine and analyze the notion of emotional labor and its effects on female characters' emotional states within Abbas's *The Empty Room*. The central aim is to investigate the manifestations of emotional labor undertaken by women in the novel, with a specific focus on how these actions are shaped by societal expectations and patriarchal structures. Through an analysis of the protagonist's experiences and emotional responses, this research seeks to elucidate the emotional toll of emotional labor on women's mental health, interpersonal relationships, self-perception and her existence of her own.

The study strives to enrich the discourse surrounding emotional labor, feminism, and women's well-being through critical examination of the novel's hands. It offers a sophisticated comprehension of women's experiences. Not only this, the research also seeks to critically analyze the concept of emotional labor and its effects on women's emotional well-being within Abbas's *The Empty Room*. Emotional labor is a concept that has been given by Hochschild and involves management and control of emotions to alleviate societal and relational demands in which the women are constantly required to suppress their emotions without taking into account the vulnerable and psychological repercussions. In the framework of Abbas's novel, women are portrayed as negating all the time, negotiating and compromising their own expectations and hopes, their expressions of emotions, encompassing patience, compliance, nurturing, and suppression of genuine feelings.

In short, the primary objective of this study is to:

Investigate the methods by which women engage in emotional labor within *The Empty Room*, encompassing the techniques of surface acting, deep acting, and emotional suppression, as conceptualized by Hochschild.

Research Question

This study aims to answer;

How do woman in the novel perform emotional labor, and what are the emotional costs of this labor?

Limitations of the Study

This study is restricted to a single literary work, *The Empty Room*. Although this focused methodology facilitates a thorough, nuanced, and detailed examination of the protagonist Tahira's experiences, but it simultaneously restricts the wider applicability of the conclusions.

The research is primarily grounded in Arlie Hochschild's "Emotional Labor Theory" (1983), which emphasizes the management of emotions in social and occupational contexts. While Hochschild's framework is highly relevant to examining women's emotional regulation in the novel, it may not fully capture other dimensions of emotional experience, such as unconscious emotional processing, culturally specific expressions of affect, or intersectional factors like class, ethnicity, or religious identity. In addition, Hochschild's theory was initially developed within Western contexts, and applying it to a Pakistani socio-cultural framework may involve interpretive limitations regarding cultural specificity and contextual nuances. The present investigation centers on the emotional labor undertaken by women, specifically Tahira and her female colleagues.

Literature Review

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Emotional Labor: Concept and Theoretical Foundations

The concept of emotional labor provides an important framework for understanding how individuals regulate and manage emotions in accordance with social expectations. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) introduced emotional labor as the process through which individuals regulate feelings to create publicly observable emotional displays. She distinguished between surface acting and deep acting and emphasized the psychological consequences of emotional dissonance that arise when genuine feelings conflict with socially prescribed emotional performances. Expanding this understanding, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argue that emotional labor involves displaying emotions expected within particular social roles and may be performed through surface acting, deep acting, or the expression of genuine emotions. Together, these perspectives establish emotional labor as a significant mechanism through which social norms shape emotional expression and identity.

Emotional Labor, Emotional Suffering, and Women's Wellbeing

Research on emotional labor highlights its close relationship with emotional suffering and psychological wellbeing. Illouz (2018) argues that emotional suffering is not merely a personal experience but is deeply connected to social and cultural structures that regulate and shape emotional life. Women's emotional experiences are often conditioned by expectations that require them to suppress personal desires and prioritize the emotional needs of others. Such expectations transform emotional management into a continuous form of labor that affects emotional wellbeing. Similarly, studies of professional settings demonstrate the psychological consequences of emotional labor. Qeshta, Samikon, and Abbas (2022) show that emotional labor strategies significantly influence job satisfaction and burnout among nurses, illustrating how the constant regulation of emotions can lead to emotional exhaustion. These findings suggest that emotional labor functions not only as a social expectation but also as a source of emotional strain.

Emotional Labor and Women's Representation in Literature

Literary studies have increasingly applied emotional labor theory to examine the experiences of female characters and the gendered expectations imposed upon them. Arnold (2020), in her analysis of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, demonstrates how dependent women are required to perform affection, gratitude, and emotional compliance in order to secure their social position. Similarly, Niehaus (2018) argues that emotional labor plays a central role in the construction of female subjectivity in *Outlander*, where emotional work validates women's experiences and exposes the often-overlooked value of women's affective contributions. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* also presents emotional labor as a central concern, portraying a protagonist who suppresses her authentic emotions in order to conform to the socially prescribed role of a dutiful wife and mother. These literary representations reveal how emotional labor operates as a gendered practice that shapes women's identities, relationships, and emotional wellbeing.

Emotional Labor and Patriarchal Control in *The Empty Room*

The existing scholarship on emotional labor provides a useful lens for understanding the experiences depicted in Sadia Abbas's *The Empty Room*. The novel presents more than an account of individual suffering; it exposes the emotional structures through

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

which patriarchal societies regulate women's lives. Through Tahira's experiences, the narrative demonstrates how emotional repression functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of social control that rewards silence, endurance, and self-sacrifice. In this context, emotional labor becomes a means through which patriarchal expectations are internalized and sustained. Although previous studies have explored emotional labor in workplace settings and literary texts, limited attention has been paid to its role in shaping women's emotional wellbeing in *The Empty Room*. This gap underscores the need for a focused examination of how emotional labor influences Tahira's emotional experiences and how the novel critiques the cultural and social forces that perpetuate women's emotional suffering.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring subjective experiences, social constructs, and complex emotional phenomena as they are represented in literary texts. This qualitative approach allows for a thorough examination of several crucial areas: the emotional experiences of women within both domestic and social spheres; the cultural and patriarchal norms that influence emotional labor and its suppression; and the narrative techniques and symbolic elements found in literature that function to reveal social critique and resistance, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2018). Through its focus on interpretive analysis, this methodology effectively captures the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of women's experiences—dimensions that are not easily quantifiable but can be critically evaluated through literary and theoretical frameworks.

Research Method

Textual analysis serves as the principal research methodology. This approach necessitates a meticulous, structured investigation of *The Empty Room*, with the aim of discerning how emotional labor is performed and represented within the novel. Particular attention is given to the protagonist's emotional experiences and the social and cultural expectations that shape her emotional responses.

Moreover, the analytical procedure applied involves a close reading of the selected textual passages followed by thematic interpretation. The identified instances of emotional regulation, suppression, and performance are categorized and examined in relation to the broader themes of emotional labor and women's emotional wellbeing. The analysis focuses on understanding how the protagonist's emotional experiences reflect the influence of social, cultural, and patriarchal structures.

Data sources

The source of data is Abbas's novel *The Empty Room*. The novel is selected because it provides rich, detailed accounts of women's experiences within patriarchal structures, particularly focusing on the protagonist, Tahira. Key elements for data collection from the primary source include: 1. Narrative Depictions of Emotional Labor • Instances where women regulate or suppress emotions to comply with family, social, or marital expectations. • Scenes illustrating surface acting and deep acting, following Hochschild's (1983) framework.

The selection of textual evidence is based on its relevance to the study's objectives.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Passages that illustrate the protagonist's management of emotions, conflict between genuine feelings and socially expected emotional displays, experiences of emotional repression, and responses to patriarchal expectations are selected for detailed analysis.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Arlie Hochschild's (1983) Emotional Labor Theory, which provides a critical lens to analyze how women regulate, suppress, or perform emotions in response to societal and relational expectations. Emotional labor refers to the management of feelings to create a socially desirable emotional display, often at the cost of personal wellbeing. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of Tahira in Abbas's *The Empty Room*, as she navigates a patriarchal household and societal norms while attempting to maintain psychological equilibrium.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This chapter has been divided into two parts. The first part deals with the detailed analysis of *The Empty Rooms* by Abbas through the lens of Arlie Hochschild Emotional labor theory, evaluating all the possible ways Tahira has performing emotional labor. The second part presents a detailed discussion and addresses the gap. The chapter finally presents a summarized note on findings.

Data Analysis

This presents a comprehensive analysis of women's emotional labor and wellbeing in Abbas's *The Empty Room*. The analysis is grounded in Arlie Hochschild's Emotional Labor Theory (1983), focusing on surface acting, deep acting, and emotional dissonance, and explores the psychological, social, and intergenerational implications of these phenomenon.

This section presents the analysis of the text and addresses the study's research question:

1. How do women perform emotional labor, and what are its emotional costs?

Women characters including Tahira, the protagonist, her mother Mariam; her mother-in-law, Shireen and sisters-in-law Nazneen and Shaista in the novel are consistently engaged in surface acting, suppressing authentic emotions to fulfill societal and familial expectations.

Patriarchal norms heavily dictate acceptable emotional expression. Women are expected to endure marital dissatisfaction, maintain family harmony, and prioritize others' feelings. Shehzad's selective affection and manipulation exemplify male emotional authority, requiring Tahira to constantly regulate her emotions. The narrative demonstrates that emotional labor is socially constructed and culturally enforced, embedding itself within domestic and intergenerational dynamics.

The novel opens from climax when Tahira had to made struggle immediately after her marriage; she was forced to follow those rituals for which she was least convinced. She had to sit among the crowd of the relatives of her husband, —*Shehzad and she were made to share kheer from the same bowl, feeding each other excruciating, hesitant spoonfuls.*”(p.17). It highlights the emotional toll experienced by women as a result of cultural norms. The scene, set at the beginning of Tahira's marriage, demonstrates how societal expectations and patriarchal systems immediately shape her behavior. Rather than privately or authentically adjusting to her new marital role,

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Tahira was forced to engage in a performance by “*feeding through hesitant spoonfuls*”, intended to entertain her family.

Tahira's sister in law's selection of a heavily worked shalwar kameez for her provides a compelling example of how women's experiences are subtly, yet profoundly, influenced by familial and cultural expectations. This attire, chosen for her rather than by her, symbolizes the weight of tradition and the implicit pressures on women to conform to societal standards concerning femininity, propriety, and outward presentation. The act of dressing itself becomes a form of emotional labor; Tahira is obligated to do what is dictated, thus stifling her personal preferences to maintain her family's understanding of decorum, ...*put on the heavily worked shalwar kameez her sisters had left on a hanger on the door the night before* (p.16). This seemingly simple action, however, is a small example of the emotional work described by Arlie Hochschild, which is managing the feelings and how they are shown to fit societal expectations, often at the expense of personal honesty and addresses the research question as well.

Not only this she had been taught when and what she was supposed to wear, *She put on the necklace.....and examined her face with embarrassed, careful attention, wincing at the brightness of the lipstick she had been told by her mother she must wear the first few days— before.*”(p.16). This indicates the intricate, embodied aspects of emotional labor that women undertake to meet patriarchal standards of femininity. Tahira's preparation, under the supervision of her mother and sisters-in-law, Shaista and Nazneen exemplifies how familial relationships reinforce societal expectations. Her visible discomfort during the lipstick application highlights the tension between her genuine emotions and the imposed unease. The red lipstick here symbolizes that happiness which she was supposed to keep on her face even being unhappy.

Regarding the implementation and repercussions of emotional labor, Tahira's dressing ritual exemplifies surface acting: she outwardly presents herself as a beautiful, adorned bride while internally resisting the required performance. Although she does not authentically experience vibrancy or comfort, she is compelled to project this facade through the application of jewelry and makeup. Emotional labor is mandated even in the private sphere of dressing, thereby confining bridal beauty to expose its inherent cost: the suppression of women's genuine emotions in deference to patriarchal expectations.

The command didn't stop here, she was ordered even like the waiters, “*Bring us some tea. We want to talk to our brother. Alone.*” “*I don't know where the kitchen is.*” “*You'll find it. It's across from the stairs.*” *Shehzad said nothing.*(p.16). The initial interaction between Tahira and her sister-in-law immediately highlights the domestic and emotional duties Tahira is expected to take on in her new home. Shaista's suggestion, presented as a casual conversation, requires Tahira to act as both a hostess and a caregiver, even though she is unfamiliar with the environment. This scene exemplifies Hochschild's idea of surface acting. Tahira is forced to hide her confusion and discomfort, thus concealing these feelings behind a facade of obedient compliance. The costs are twofold: first, she cannot express her vulnerability as a new bride in an unfamiliar place; second, she is forced into the role of a domestic worker, expected to put others' needs before her own. Hochschild argues that this constant suppression of genuine emotion, in favor of expected displays, creates emotional dissonance, which can lead to exhaustion and a sense of self-alienation which becomes evident at the end of novel. This instance illustrates that patriarchal structures

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

operate not solely through male figures, but also via women who perpetuate established cultural conventions. In the modern times and even in the conventional ones, the women are not only subjugated by the main counterparts in the patriarchal system, but they are also subjugated by other women. It is only the woman that is actually worsening the situation of a wife with her husband. In this case, Tahira is not only subjugated or suppressed by her husband Shehzad, but she is more subjugated by her mother-in-law.

Shaista, in her capacity as a sister-in-law, possesses the authority to dictate Tahira's conduct, thereby underscoring Tahira's subjugation and revealing her familial role as one of servitude and reticence. The "feeling rules" are unambiguous: a newlywed is anticipated to exhibit obedience, a readiness to serve, and an acceptance of her subordinate status.

She started putting herself in the shoes of them, she acted how they liked, "*went back up, holding the tray like a child given a new responsibility.*" (p.17). Newlywed brides are not asked to do anything in the initial days, even in some traditions, and just like in case of Tahira, people even don't want the new brides to walk or do the home chores for the first six months. Suppose you watch a newlywed bride and on the very next day she is just walking around and doing the household of the other people at the home and not just taking and fulfilling the responsibility of her husband from the day first, but she is forced to perform the duties of others as well. Moreover, she is not expected to say no because there is no option of no or she is not strong enough to say no. Even parents, they don't make their daughters learn to say no when it is even the subjugation of their basic human rights.

This brief yet telling description captures the infantilization and emotional burden imposed on Tahira in her marital home. By likening her to —a child given a new responsibility, Abbas highlights how patriarchal systems strip women of their agency, reducing them to learners or dependents even as they are expected to shoulder adult duties. The act of carrying a tea tray becomes emblematic of the emotional labor required of women to internalize roles of obedience and service while simultaneously masking their vulnerability. Through the use of metaphor of child for Tahira, the writer asserts the act of emotional labor clearly.

Through the lens of Hochschild's theory of emotional labor, Tahira's task is not simply to carry tea but to manage her feelings in accordance with the feeling rules of the household. She must suppress her uncertainty and present the image of a capable, dutiful bride, even though she feels awkward and out of place.

It was just the beginning, the in-laws fell from grace even when; "*She went up to the room wondering when she would finally get some food.*" (p.19). and "*Tahira adding extra sugar to her tea to stave off the hunger.*" (p.18). She was not supposed to even feel hungry, she had to suppress her hunger and whenever she felt hunger or thirst, she had to ask her mother-in-law when her mood was good. And when after all the day had passed with all the pain in her heart as she bears all the bitter words of her mother-in-law, she just waits for the night that she could finally get some food because all the day, she was not allowed to eat any of the food because it was her responsibility to fulfill her responsibilities at the first place. Even if she has to remain hungry all the day, she would eat only when she has fulfilled all her chores and responsibilities being handed over to her and which she was supposed to fulfill at any cost, no matter what. The passage underscores the profound neglect of Tahira's basic human requirements, thereby highlighting the intersection of physical suffering and

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

emotional strain. Her hunger, unnoticed by those around her, reflects the inclination to subordinate women's physical needs to the demands of societal customs, superficial appearances, and prevailing social conventions. The influence of societal expectations is evident in how hunger transforms into a measure of compliance.

Patriarchal norms dictate that a bride's role necessitates silent endurance, placing rituals and the comfort of others above her own physical welfare.

Yet another instance speaks of the patriarchy when she was banished, "*Did he not understand it would be unseemly with hands still hennaed, ... to raise the question of being locked outside for two hours early in the morning?*" (p.19). This starkly illustrates the conflict between Tahira's inner turmoil and the public persona she must maintain. The physical signs of her bridehood—hennaed hands, the deep red of her shoes—transform into metaphorical chains, constraining her to the demands of happiness and virtue, even as she's been wounded by indifference. Waseem's anxious look threatens to reveal the truth, yet Tahira's fury at his unspoken inquiry highlights the depth of her emotional effort: she must not only conceal her suffering but also silence anyone who might reveal it. To acknowledge the reality of being "locked outside" would shatter the carefully crafted image of the bride, an act considered "improper" by the rules of honor and decorum that dictate her position. Tahira engages in surface acting, projecting an image of calm while consuming the sweet.

Through backshowing technique, the writer asserts the cause of Tahira's suffering. It was not only Tahira but Shireen too who performed emotional labor. As Abbas said, "*In his older age, her husband had become relatively easy to control, almost docile. But Shireen..... If asked for money, he would hit her... She tried not to ask him for money until it was absolutely necessary, until the pantry was empty and there was no food in the house, and the children were beginning to go hungry, remove the girls from school because there was no money for school uniforms, and because they could not afford food.*" (p.62). Shireen's account of her husband's abusive conduct highlights how patriarchal systems necessitate women's persistent emotional labor. Her calculated responses to financial demands, alongside her reluctance until the pantry was empty, exemplify Hochschild's notion of women's enforced management of male anger for survival which may otherwise cost them their death. This conduct transcends passive suffering; it constitutes a forced form of calculation, where her physical being and emotional well-being are weaponized for the family's continued existence. The fact that she once considered removing her daughters from school emphasizes the far reaching consequences of such violence on the paths of successive generations. Tahira is suffering at the hands of her mother-in-law, but the bitterness that the mother-in-law carries has been derived from the very bitterness that her mother-in-law has conceived from her own in-laws, hence the cycle goes on. The bitterness in the attitude and the etiquette of Tahira's mother-in-law has had direct consequences and the impacts on her. It can be thought of that if her mother-in-law had not gone through such a bitter cycle of hardships that were being imposed on her by her in-laws, she must have been a good woman for her daughter-in-law.

So this is very traditional in patriarchal society that when mother-in-law passes on her experiences and her bitterness to daughter-in-law and hence the cycle goes on, and the incoming daughter-in-law has to perform emotional labor in order to hide the feelings for the time being, as she has to suppress those feelings in her own time. So she just uses those words and harshness on her daughter-in-law in the future to satisfy her own inner self. Hence, this excerpt highlights the cyclical nature of

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

patriarchal systems across generations. Shireen, who initially suffers from this system, later mirrors its dynamics by inflicting harm on Tahira. What seems like cruelty is, in fact, the transference of her own oppression. For Tahira, Shireen's dominance is both a direct source of suffering and a warning: unchecked emotional suppression and self-blame can become entrenched patterns of power directed at other women. The contrast between Shireen's past victimization and Tahira's current strategies of subtle defiance and ironic detachment emphasizes that resistance, despite its vulnerability, can potentially break this cycle.

The performance of labor didn't stop here. Even Mariam, Tahira's mother had to dissimulate her emotions, when she says to Shahzad, "*Beta, do come in. I've made gaajar ka halva. Remember you told me you loved it?*" "*No. I have to go. Tahira are you coming?*" This scene powerfully illustrates how patriarchal power manifests through deliberate coldness and how women's emotional labor is mobilized to contain the humiliation it produces. Mariam's warm invitation—rooted in hospitality, euphemism and care—is brusquely dismissed by Shehzad, whose refusal strips the gesture of dignity. His abrupt command, "Tahira are you coming?" reduces her to a passive appendage of his authority, underscoring the unequal distribution of agency. Mariam and Intizar's forced smiles, held in place despite the slight, mirror Tahira's own labor: women are required to mask pain and maintain appearances, even when publicly disrespected. The car, shielding Shehzad's indifference from external view, becomes the literal and symbolic vehicle of invisibility, carrying away both Tahira's voice and the humiliation imposed on her family.

This scene exposes the exhausting façade that women must maintain. Tahira, Mariam, and Intizar all are engaged in Hochschild's *surface acting*: they suppress their authentic hurt and replace it with smiles or silence to prevent open conflict. The cost is the internalization of humiliation. Tahira, "leaning into the seat," embodies resignation—her body absorbing the blow that her voice cannot express. Emotional labor here is corrosive, requiring not only concealment of individual distress but also the preservation of collective dignity in the face of patriarchal disdain.

Discussion and Findings

The famous and prominent writer Sara Ahmed's 2004 work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, asserts that emotions transcend individual experiences, function as social practices intimately connected to our corporeal existence and shape the manifestation of gender and power dynamics. The same aligns with this study as Tahira was also being compelled to practice the emotional labor to the extent that it becomes part of her personality. This very social practice of practicing the emotions really becomes a part of her existence.

This episode of Mariam making halwa for Shehzad also highlights how cultural codes valorize male autonomy and dismiss female gestures of care. Mariam's halva, a symbol of maternal affection and cultural hospitality, is devalued by Shehzad's curt refusal.

Feminist affect theory emphasizes that emotional well-being is more than just a personal psychological state; it's also a cultural and political achievement. Same was done by Tahira. She was just tired of the performance of emotional apprehension. She chose the personal autonomy and she started to practice painting so that she could resist one way or the other.

From the perspective of feminist literary studies, the study highlights emotional labor

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

as a critical lens for understanding the representation of women's lived experiences in literature. It demonstrates how emotional suppression, caregiving expectations, and emotional compliance are normalized as feminine virtues, thereby concealing the emotional cost of patriarchal systems. By foregrounding emotional labor, this research contributes to feminist scholarship by revealing how literature exposes the invisible emotional work performed by women and how such representations challenge dominant narratives of gender, obedience, and emotional resilience.

In her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Russell Hochschild defines emotional labor as the act of managing feelings to create acceptable emotional displays in social situations. This study has been based on this very idea and in case of Tahira is very prominent that she is practicing the emotional labor throughout her life she is just concealing her emotions in order to be accepted in the society and to be called as a good wife and good woman. Russell's ideas about dissimulation, simulation, and dissimulation are relevant to this study, as they help explain the woman's actions. To avoid conflict and to be seen as respectable by men and society, she hides her true feelings.

Goutam Karmakar and Payel Pal's *Room (Un) occupied: Repression, Precarity and Autonomy* resonates deeply with Abbas's *The Empty Room*. The research's later sections highlight the restrictive gender roles in Pakistan's conservative, male-dominated society, as shown by the end of Tahira's marriage. Likewise Gill and Harvey note that South Asian women often adopt expected models of femininity, even when these norms limit their individuality. Shehzad's constant criticism of Tahira's background, along with his insistence on teaching her "responsibilities," highlights the combined influence of religious, moral, and social ideas that support male dominance.

Scholarly research across service-oriented professions consistently emphasizes emotional labor as a crucial requirement for effective performance and professional identity formation. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) conceptualize emotional labor as the display of socially expected emotions during service encounters, establishing a foundational framework for understanding how workers manage feelings as part of their occupational roles. Building on this, Qeshta, Samikon, and Abbas (2022) argue that nurses, as frontline service employees, must maintain professionalism by regulating their emotions while interacting with patients, a demand that significantly shapes job satisfaction and burnout. Similarly, Tang and Gu (2024) highlight emotional labor as an often-overlooked yet essential dimension of leadership, demonstrating how leaders' emotional regulation influences employees' own emotional labor practices. Hence from household to politics emotional labor plays part and is extremely crucial as in case of Tahira.

Within care-based professions, particularly nursing, emotional labor is shown to extend far beyond technical or task-based responsibilities. Kim (2018) demonstrates that nursing involves intensive emotional work, as nurses are obligated to address patients' emotional as well as physical needs, frequently leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and depression. Banumathi Selva (2025) analyzes Mahasweta Devi's short stories to expose the systematic exploitation of women's bodies and affective labor, illustrating how emotional labor is deeply entangled with socio-economic and patriarchal structures as proven by Shahzad. Similarly, Niehaus (2018) argues that the romance novel *Outlander* exemplifies authorial emotional labor as a feminist project, challenging the dismissal of women's emotional work as trivial or

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

sentimental. Arnold's (2020) examination of *Little Dorrit* reinforces this argument by showing how dependent women characters are disciplined through emotional labor expectations. In short, these studies demonstrate that emotional labor is not only a workplace phenomenon but also a powerful lens for analyzing gender, power, and representation across social and literary contexts.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, published in 1983, offers an early and impactful look at how women resist systemic oppression, showing how marriage, displacement, and societies that value honor restrict women's lives. Similarly, Tahira's life has been confined to a single space, her ambitions and dreams put on hold to uphold a man's reputation and obligations.

In Henrik Ibsen's (1879) *A Doll's House*, the main character's escape from oppression is symbolized by the door closing at the end. In contrast, Tahira's story shows her helplessness to follow the rules of her new home.

Dana C. Jack's *Silencing the Self: Women and Depression* (1991) explores the ways in which women suppress their emotions to preserve relationships and secure social approval. The text correlates emotional labor and self-silencing with psychological distress and a diminished sense of self. Same happened with Tahira. She has been suppressed and all the time she is performing emotional labor and rituals silencing her and making her feel she is someone with no identity which ultimately made her mentally unstable, a heavy price paid for performing emotional labor.

Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989) examines the unpaid emotional and domestic labor undertaken by working women following their formal employment. It emphasizes how emotional caregiving within familial structures contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality and exhaustion as happened with Tahira.

Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) provides an examination of how women are socially conditioned to be the primary emotional caregivers. This work investigates the intergenerational transmission of emotional labor, with a particular focus on the influence of gendered parenting roles. Emotional labor not confined to a single generation, but to something that gets transferred from one generation to another, has the same happening in this very novel as the emotional labor performed by Tahira's mother was eventually performed by Tahira herself.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) posits that gender is performative, encompassing the performance of emotions. Women, just like Tahira, are supposed to regulate their emotions in every situation and every time. Hence, they are always in search for social acceptance while regulating their emotions.

Research findings and outcomes

This subsection presents the research findings and outcomes of the study, based on a qualitative, interpretive analysis of Abbas's *The Empty Room*. The study addressed women's performance of emotional labor, its psychological and social consequences, and the strategies they employ to reclaim agency. Hochschild's Emotional Labor Theory (1983) served as the primary analytical lens, with a focus on surface acting, deep acting, and emotional dissonance. The findings are organized to address the research questions while highlighting the broader implications for women's emotional wellbeing in patriarchal contexts.

Women in the novel, particularly Tahira, frequently performs surface acting, concealing authentic emotions to conform to societal and familial expectations. This

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

involves outwardly displaying obedience, composure, and nurturing behavior even when experiencing frustration, anger, or despair. For instance, during family dinners, Tahira hides her discontent toward Shehzad's constant criticism: Dinner with Tahira and Shehzad had been intolerable. Tahira's demeanor is characterized by a terse and monitoring presence, yet she is indulgent toward her children.

Surface acting, which involves feigning emotions, precipitates emotional dissonance, hence causing stress, self-alienation, and a reduced sense of personal agency. Besides surface acting, Tahira also employs deep acting, consciously striving to modify her internal emotional experience to conform to societal norms. By fostering patience, care, and emotional regulation, she endeavors to preserve domestic tranquility, notwithstanding her internal struggles. Although deep acting can assist women in navigating patriarchal environments, it necessitates considerable cognitive and emotional investment, ultimately leading to exhaustion and emotional fragmentation. Patriarchal structures dictate the emotional performances expected of women, positioning them as caregivers, compliant spouses, and emotionally controlled mothers. Tahira's suppression of anger and desire exemplifies her response to gendered social expectations, hence demonstrating how society enforces emotional labor.

Theoretically, this study extends Hochschild's emotional labor framework beyond workplace and service environments into domestic and cultural domains. It demonstrates that emotional labor functions not only as an occupational requirement but also as a structural feature of patriarchal societies that governs women's emotional expression across everyday life and costs them heavily.

Conclusion

This research finds that emotional labor in Abbas's *The Empty Room* is primarily expressed through emotional suppression, compliance, and continuous self-regulation, through which the protagonist navigates patriarchal norms, familial hierarchies, and societal expectations. These practices significantly shape women's emotional wellbeing by producing psychological strain, emotional dissonance, and challenges in maintaining a stable sense of identity.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by extending Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor beyond workplace settings into domestic, cultural, and literary contexts. It demonstrates that emotional labor functions as a structural mechanism within patriarchal systems that governs women's emotional expression and reinforces gendered power relations. The study further contributes to feminist literary studies by highlighting how literature represents the invisible emotional burdens experienced by women.

The implications of this research suggest that emotional labor should be recognized as a key factor in understanding women's emotional wellbeing in patriarchal societies. It emphasizes that emotional suppression and self-sacrifice are socially constructed expectations embedded within cultural norms rather than individual choices. This highlights the importance of emotional labor as an analytical tool for examining gendered power relations in literary texts.

Future research may explore emotional labor in other literary works across different cultural and regional contexts to enable comparative insights. It may also benefit from interdisciplinary approaches that integrate feminist theory, psychology, and literary studies to further examine women's emotional wellbeing, identity formation, and

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

resistance strategies.

REFERENCES

- Abbas, S. (2015). *The Empty Room*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Ahmad, M. H., & Ali Khan, M. W. (2022). *An empirical study of emotional labor on customer loyalty intentions with mediating role of perceived service quality in banking sector*. *International Journal of Industrial Management*, 13(1), 479–490
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Arnold, A. (2020). *The trouble with Tattycoram: Emotional labor and the dependent woman in Little Dorrit*. *Dickens Studies Annual*, 51(2), 314–338
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2012). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (Revised ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Kim J. (2018). *Emotional Labor in the Care Field and Empathy-enhancing Education by Reading Literature: A Brief Review*. *Iranian journal of public health*, 47(8), 1084–1089. Kashif, M.,
- Niehaus, E. E. (2018). *Laboring for love: Authorial emotional labor as feminist project in the romance novel Outlander*. In *Proceedings of the Researching Romance Conference* (pp. 1–12). Bowling Green State University
- Tang, X., & Gu, Y. (2024). *Influence of Leaders' Emotional Labor and Its Perceived Appropriateness on Employees' Emotional Labor*. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(5), 413.