



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Beyond the Binary of the Religious and the Secular: Mobility-shaped Agency of Muslim Women in Kamila Shamsie's Fiction**

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite plethora of feminist research on Muslim women in Pakistan, mobility as an intersectional factor in the formation of their agency and its cultural impact has lacked the focus of scholarship – and, this lack of focus is especially glaring in literary criticism of Pakistani English literature. With the aim to analyze the impact of mobility in shaping Muslim women's agency in their performative creation of a third-space in relation to the traditional concept of modesty (*sharmand haya*), this article examines the female protagonists of Kamila Shamsie's novels *Broken Verses* (2005) and *Salt and Saffron* (2000). It argues that mobility enables Muslim women to reposition themselves against and redefine the traditional understandings of modesty without affiliating themselves with secularist or conservative religious standpoints. This article invites attention of the academia to study mobile Muslim women's subjectivity from the standpoint of the performatively created third-space which is shaped by mobility.

**Introduction**

Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* (2005) and *Salt and Saffron* (2000) problematize the views that Muslim women can be reduced into the categories of being either religious or secular. It views and presents its female characters from an alternative position which, beyond the internally-triggered pursuit of religious piety (Mahmood, 2001, 2005; Sehlkoglou, 2017) and universalist secular autonomy (Zia, 2018), emphasizes multiplicity of subjectivity and agency as shaped by mobility. It presents them as alternating among various sources of empowerment and making pragmatic and strategic use of their awareness, knowledge, cultural exposures, global connectivity and physical and virtual travels to make agentive performativity of their communal identity and also to pursue their individual aspirations and desires. It makes their subjectivity fluid, non-fixed and multiple. There has been plethora of feminist studies on Muslim women; however, their agency has recently emerged as an intriguing area for researchers to explore it further. It has mostly been studied for its orientation in either religion or secular imaginaries. There is paucity of

research on mobility-enabled/shaped agency of Muslim women and its cultural impact in the form of structural subversion of women's traditional gendered roles, especially in the context of Pakistan, and further especially in the literary criticism of Pakistani English literature. Analyzing the constructive impact of mobility becomes useful especially in the current era of hypermobility and its resultant ongoing cultural transformations through temporal and spatial compression. Against the backdrop of the reductive dualistic discursive standpoints that view Muslim women's agency either through the ideological lens of religion or secular, this article, therefore, analyzes major female characters from the fiction to understand how mobility shapes their agency. Through qualitative content analysis, it examines the agency of the characters from the postmodern feminist and cultural perspective of mobility-driven capability (Kronlid, 2008; Salazar, 2018; Thimm, 2018) which shapes performativity (Butler, 1990) and third-space (Bhabha, 1994; Khan & Kirmani, 2018). It situates them in the wider relevant socio-cultural, religious and political context of Pakistan to understand the representativeness of the characters and their situations. This article argues that, as reflected through the characters, agency of Muslim women is shaped by their mobility and is multiple and complex and cannot be reduced into the simplistic categories of the religious and the secular. It argues that the dualistic categories of agency are limited in their workability and acceptability in Pakistan and that Muslim women in their life experiences are seen engaged in mobility-enabled performatively created third-space. It also argues that agency, subjectivity and culture are fluid and non-fixed constructs - and, Muslim women or Muslim culture is no exception.

### **Muslim Women's Agency Reduced by the Binary of the Religious and the Secular**

Secular standpoint of feminism prefers to define women's subjectivity in the light of secular universal human rights which recognize all human beings as equal in their rights irrespective of class, race, ethnicity, caste, sex, gender, religion, culture, tradition, location and personal views. It identifies structural subjection of women and combats it through secular political struggles. In Pakistan, secular feminists believe in secular feminist standpoint as a strategic interruption to the way religion is used to dominate, suppress, restrict and silence Muslim women (Zia, 2018). They view women's agency which is not rooted in the discourse of secular human rights as limited, non-emancipatory and thus not to be the point of departure or advocated for. Secular resistance and struggle for women's rights in Pakistan took its momentum when Women Action Forum (WAF), a feminist organization of educated elite class urban women, was made in 1981 to publically oppose the *Hudood Ordinances* (the gender-biased laws of fornication, rape and adultery made by the state under the presidency of the then military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq (1978-1988); the laws were propagated by the state as to have been meant to Islamize the society). WAF organized frequent public protests and demonstrations in major cities against the laws, faced state suppression and violence, but ultimately succeeded in attracting international attention and pushing the state back in some aspects of the laws. The recent #MeToo movement and *Aurat Marches* are also inspired by the

secular discourse of human rights which want to see women regarded as equal in their human rights. However, such organizations, movements or marches have widely been termed by nationalists and Islamists in Pakistan as Western agenda of promoting vulgarity and cultural Westernization. Instead, they argue in favor of the like of the agency which is rooted in religion and the culture of modesty, morality and piety (Ciftci, 2018; Iqtidar, 2011; Jamal, 2005, 2013; Mahmood, 2001, 2005; Zubair & Zubair, 2017). They understand agency as not necessarily subversive of and resistive to patriarchy; they rather locate agency in intentional and free action even when it is not emancipatory against the various patriarchal suppressions identified by secularists. Stuck within the secular and non-secular narratives, Muslim women's subjectivity seems to have been reduced. The dualistic ideological narrative positions may be effective in their political struggles; but, in lived experiences of Muslim women, they are limited in their workability and acceptability. Moreover, Muslim women do not always exclusively fall into either of the categories. There are a number of factors that constitute and impinge on subjectivity to make it complex, fluid and multiple. Between the discourse of the secular and the religious, the impact of these factors need not to be overlooked in enabling women to performatively carve out a third-space. Amongst other intersectional constituents of subjectivity, mobility is an important factor which has yet to receive the close scholarly attention which it deserves in the contemporary era of increased, rapid and multiple forms of mobility.

Mobility has been conceptualized as *corporeal* travels of people for different purposes which may include work, leisure, escape, migration, pleasure or family life; it can also be *imaginative* travels through images/visuals of people, cultures and places on, for example, television; it can also be *virtual* travels through internet, and *communicative* travels through, for example, fax, telephone, letters and/or mobile phone, etc. (Kronlid, 2008; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Thimm, 2018). The current era, Pakistan of course is no exception, is characterized by rapid mobility, temporal and spatial compression, disruption of traditional institutions, closeness of the local and the global and cultural globalization (McDowell, 1996). Mobility has strong influence on the identity and subjectivity of its actors or participants and, as a result, on their social behaviors, practices and culture (Salazar, 2018). Mobile subjects are likely to be fluid, complex, deterritorialized and multiple – negating essentiality and fixedness of identity, subjectivity and cultures. Put in relation with the dualistic discourses of the secular and the religious subjectivity, they may pragmatically redefine and appropriate the narratives to situate themselves somewhere in the third-space which does not discard the past while in its attempt to step into the future. Despite their stepping forward and backward, ambiguity, sense of loss, displacement and anxiety, they actively participate in the process of cultural globalization which interrupts the control of traditional social and cultural power structures. However, it does not mean that the tangible core of the traditional ceases to exert its influence on the subject; the ambiguity or the sense of loss is a sign of the still connectedness of that very tangible core which informs and forms traditional institutional structures and hierarchies; moreover, it also means that fluidity to undermine the fixity of

structures has taken place. Further it also indicates the going in hand in hand of mobility-driven performativity and third-space.

The postmodern feminist theory of performativity identifies women's subjectivity as agentive continuous enactment of norms and expanding the space by letting various contextual understandings and practices of norms to intervene while in the process of the enactment (Butler, 1990, 2009). Agency in performativity signifies the constructedness of gender (Salih, 2002). Studies have found Muslim women in Pakistan as being performative to expand their social space from within rather than without traditional norms (Amin, 2018; Khurshid, 2015, 2016, 2020; Masood, 2018). The context or factors, especially mobility, which increase the capacity to be agentive while in the process of performativity, have lacked focus. The cultural theory of third-space assumes a minority subjectivity while in interaction with the center to negotiate its position in the 'beyond' – the beyond refers to the space which is away from the specific or fixed (Bhabha, 1994). It is the space of the resignification of the traditional when in interaction with the modern. It is the space of resistance, empowerment and enunciation when in confrontation with the suppressive. However, what factors, for example mobility, enhance the capability of being creatively resistant and actively agentive while in interstices for the third-space to expand into larger-scale cultural hybridity is in need of further nuanced attention. Performativity and third-space intersect at the point where they both emphasize the fluidity and non-fixedness of the subject. Mobility comes to impact and shape the theoretical intersected position through its role to determine the scale of agentiveness of the subject. Safdar and Ghani (2018) have already identified and employed this empowering theoretical intersection in the lives of Muslim women; however, they have not made meticulous identification of it the way this article has made. This article takes the theoretical framework of Safdar and Ghani (2018) a step forward by creating further clarity in it. This article foregrounds the significance of mobility as a contextual factor which shapes the scale of agentiveness of Muslim women in their performatively created third-space. To examine the impact of mobility in shaping the agentiveness of performativity and third-space or the agency of women in performative third-space, this article focuses on the selected female characters' practice of modesty (*haya, sharm*) in interactions with male strangers (*na-mehram*) in the fiction.

### **Redefined Modesty by Mobile Muslim Women**

Muslim women in Pakistan are generally expected to be reserved, reticent, shy and reluctant in their interactions with all males except their spouse. They are supposed to maintain a proper physical distance, low voice tone, 'good' language, civilized behavior and the sort of appearance that does not imply any sign of immorality, sexuality and promiscuity. They are also expected to keep their gaze lower and observe proper body-covering dress and the veil that properly covers their chest and head without inviting/arousing sexual feelings of males. Even in their interactions with their male family members like father, brother and uncle, they

are supposed to observe these norms of *sharmand haya* (modesty). Those who observe these norms are regarded as *ba-haya* (modest). Through patriarchal interpretations of the Quranic text, the observation of the concepts of modesty related to *haya* and *sharmin* interactions with male strangers (*na-mehram*) has been emphatically associated with women (Syed & Ali, 2005); and, exercise of it has further been considered as a symbol of piety and essential characteristic of Muslim women's subjectivity by presenting it as an internal or spiritual attachment with God without finding it as an internalization of patriarchal codes (Abu-Zahra, 1970; Mahmood, 2005; Zia, 2018). Secular understandings of the concepts of modesty, however, consider them as structural religio-cultural suppression of women and advocate for secular struggle against them to change the social behaviors and obstruct the narrative of their origin. It restricts Muslim women between the two dualistic ideological positions. Therefore, this article focuses on the mobility-enabled agency of the female characters of Samina in *Broken Verses* and of Aliya in *Salt and Saffron* to argue that Muslim women creatively carve out a third-space through performativity of the norms of *haya* and *sharmin* their interactions with *na-mehram*.

*Broken Verses* is a literary depiction of the historical struggle of WAF and the hardships and state violence the women, especially its female leadership faced; and how their individual and family life ruined in their feminist cause. Samina is the protagonist of the novel. Though she is also in love with another man, she has to divorce her husband and leave her daughter especially for the sake of her purpose to continue to lead the feminist activism against the Pakistani state. Several times, she was taken into the custody and threatened by the state agencies; to escape arrests and violence, she has to disappear and go into exile. Throughout the story, her daughter, Aasmani keeps fighting her internal conflict regarding the life of her mother, her decision to leave her daughter, and the validity and integrity of her struggle. Eventually, the suspense around Samina's being either alive or not and the conflict of the validity and integrity of her struggle get resolved into presenting her an honorable yet fallible human being who fought her best for the greater cause of the rights of women in Pakistan. *Salt and Saffron* is the fictive journey of Aliya's internal struggle against norms to claim greater space and power. By exploring and discovering various patriarchal metaphors and symbols from her ancestral history, she situates her grandmother, aunty Mariam and herself in such socio-cultural norms which restrict women in their choice in marriage and expect them to be modest by accepting the decision of their elders who are deeply class conscious. Towards the end of the story, she musters up enough courage and arguments to speak and negotiate for the assertion of her right of choice in marriage.

As regards for mobility of Samina and Aliya, Samina is a university graduate and deeply inspired by the student movements of the 1960s for social issues which included rights of women as well. She works in her uncle's law firm and makes research for her book on 'women and jurisprudence in Pakistan'. She is increasingly given coverage by national and international media for her feminist activism in Pakistan. She also makes frequent intra-city, intercity and international travels for

the sake of her activism, exile, personal affairs and family life. She is free in all the types of her mobility which included corporeal through physical travels, imaginative through her education and activist literature, virtual through media, and communicative via telephone and letters. Aliya is also graduate from the United States of America; makes travels between Pakistan, the United Kingdom and USA. She spends considerable amount of time on internet corresponding through and checking emails, uses mobile phone and reads newspapers. Like Samina, she is free in all types of her mobility and has firsthand exposure of international culture and likes feminist rights of women. However, unlike Samina, she does not have the direct exposure and experience of feminist activism. Samina is situated at the political juncture of Pakistan when secularism came under severe attack by the advent of state-sponsored aggressive social Islamization of which women were the central target, in the last quarter of the 1970s. Aliya is situated in the socio-political conditions in Pakistan when there is no organized feminist political activism; however, women depending on their individual empowerment make attempts to bend normative structures in their individual private life and small social circles.

In a public and recorded conversation of Samina with a very renowned Islamic scholar, Maulana Moin Haq, in Karachi in 1986, she deliberately does not cover her head; and, when pointed out of it by the cleric, she argumentatively roots this audacious action of her in reinterpretation of the Quranic text from feminine perspective. She deconstructs and refutes what she thinks is a patriarchal understanding of religion regarding Muslim women's veil and the attached concepts of *sharmand hayawhile* meeting with strangers. When the Maulana avoids to look into her eyes while in conversation with her, she asks him, "is it asking too much of you to look at me while I speak?" (Shamsie, 2005, p. 284). The Maulana replies, "Mohtarma, if you don't respect yourself and the laws of the Quran enough to keep your head covered in public, I at least respect you enough to keep my eyes averted" (Shamsie, 2005, p. 284). It is here at this point of sourcing from religion the aversion of looking at a *na-merhram* (stranger) woman (the aversion of looking at the woman signifies the expression of *sharmand haya*) where Samina goes to catch the cleric for his patriarchal misreading of the Quranic text. She attempts to correct him by giving references from Quran that what is required in the text is just "a covering" rather than "a veil". She adds that it is shirt or cloak rather than a *hijab* (veil) which is required to be worn; and also that it is not specified that what needs to be covered. She argues that head-covering is nowhere required in Quran and that the obligation of covering chest is required to be fulfilled only while in public. Such deconstructive feminine reading of Quran by digging out the strictest meanings of terms in the text is of course an untraditional work of a Muslim woman in a patriarchal society like Pakistan. However, what is more notable is her being audacious, unconventional, expressive and bold in her language, arguments and counter-arguments. When she says that "it embarrasses me profoundly to have to remind a scholar such as you of what is written in the Quran - I don't mean in your translation of it, which I have read with astonishment and wonder", mockery and ridicule of the Maulana is apparent from her words and it is also duly noticed and expressed by the audience

who crack a laughter at it. Maulana is stranger male and also a highly socially respectable and renowned. A woman is traditionally expected to keep her gaze lower, cover her head and speak and behave respectfully while in conversation with the Maulana – the typical characteristics which would prove her a modest Muslim woman. Samina observes nothing of these. Her knowledge, awareness and confidence gained through her mobility enables her to act the way she does. She does not play as the secular; she roots her arguments in reinterpretation of religion. Her performativity of norms is heavily impacted and shaped by her mobility, which enables the third-space of empowerment and enunciation for her. While in public, she covers her body and chest, but does not put on veil or full-body *hijab*. She believes that it is reasonable and logical to maintain eye-contact even with *na-mehram* while in conversation. The Poet with whom she has been presented as having extra-marital carnal relationships can indeed be a metaphor for secularism. She cannot belong to him as she cannot marry with him; she remains somewhere in-between secularism and conservative Islamism in her life experiences.

Aliya in *Salt and Saffron* often keeps thinking about Khaleel whom she loves but avoids meeting him publically as it would evoke social stigma on her and her family's honor. When once with him in a café in Karachi, she maintains a considerable distance from him and is worried lest somebody from her acquaintance or family sees her with a stranger male (*na-mehram*). However, while away from her homeland at the Heathrow airport in London, she hugged him even when she had not known exactly who he was. Being away from home and its social norms provides her a chance to act with more autonomy. She stays in contact with him through emails and even invites him to her home where he meets her parents. Nowhere in her thoughts and meetings with Khaleel is she seen observing the sort of modesty which is traditionally associated with a Muslim woman. She makes up her mind to argue with her parents to convince them to let her marry with him. Observing and understanding the mind of their daughter, her parents let her space to exercise her choice and decision. Aliya represents the modestly modern Muslim woman of Pakistan, who does not challenge the norms as audaciously, vocally and publically as Samina does (Masood, 2019). Though Samina, like Aliya, also plays from within the institutions to expand her social space, her way of playing with and engaging the norms is more challenging as she was actively and vehemently involved in their feminine reinterpretation. This difference between Samina and Aliya in their being differently challenging is linked to their diverse mobilities. Samina's mobility shapes her subjectivity specifically through her focus on and exposure of feminist literature, activism and personal interactions; it all is missing from Aliya's mobility. Aliya is daring but not audacious. However, they both share in their concept about *sharm* and *haya*, and redefine their subjectivity in relation to modesty.

Samina's and Aliya's subjective repositioning regarding the concept of modesty and its acceptance by others around them alludes to the ongoing structural cultural transformation in Pakistan, regarding what is *sharm* and *haya* while in the company of *na-mehram*. Many of the audience listening to and watching Samina

redefining the modesty connected to veil and eye-contact amuse and accept her standpoint. Aliya's exercise of modified standards of modesty, too, impresses her parents into agreeing to their daughter's point of her right to assert her will in her marriage. Such are the changes which are gradually eroding the traditional normative structures and re-standardizing them. Samina's and Aliya's repositioned subjectivities in the variously performatively created third-space regarding modesty represent the real mobile Muslim women and the resultant cultural paradigmatic change brewing in Pakistan (Safdar & Ghani, 2018). Their agency to reposition themselves to performatively create the third-space is shaped by their diverse mobility.

### **Conclusion**

Mobility is an integrally important intersecting factor to shape the agency of Samina and Aliya in *Broken Verses* and *Salt and Saffron* by Shamsie to reposition themselves in relation to the traditional concepts of *sharmand haya* (modesty) in their interactions with male strangers (*na-mehram*). They do so without affiliating themselves with secular standpoints; instead, through their redefinitions of the religious and cultural concepts after having gained secular and religious knowledge, awareness and confidence through their diverse forms of mobility beyond the conservative religious collectivity of knowledge and practice. As corresponding with their mobility, through various levels/scales of intensity they challenge the norms from within and performatively carve out a third-space which, as against the reductive and exclusive stances of the secular and the conservative religious, is wider in its workability and acceptability in the contemporary social, cultural and political circumstances of Pakistan.



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