



Regulating Women's Bodies: Reproductive Power and Female Agency in Pakistani Contemporary Novels in English

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this study is to examine how contemporary Pakistani novels written in English represent the regulation of women's bodies and reproductive roles, and how female characters negotiate agency within patriarchal structures. The research aims to explore the intersection of gender, power, and bodily autonomy, highlighting the ways literary narratives critique social, cultural, and religious constraints imposed on women. It also seeks to analyze how reproductive power is portrayed both as a means of control and as a potential source of resistance and empowerment. The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on close textual analysis of selected contemporary Pakistani English novels. Using postcolonial feminist theory and concepts of body politics, the research examines narrative techniques, character development, and thematic patterns related to bodily regulation, reproduction, and female agency. The selected texts are analyzed within their socio-cultural context to understand how literature reflects and challenges dominant patriarchal ideologies. The analysis reveals that women's bodies in these novels function as contested sites where social norms, moral expectations, and power relations are enforced. Reproductive roles such as marriage and motherhood are shown to limit women's autonomy, yet the narratives also present subtle and overt forms of resistance. Female characters assert agency through self-awareness, emotional resilience, and acts of defiance, thereby destabilizing traditional gender roles.

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1.0 Introduction

Women body control has always been a key tool by which patriarchal power has been generated, perpetuated and justified in various cultures. This rule is so entrenched in South Asian, especially Pakistani social practices, religious discourses, law, and family set ups that it ultimately determines the role of women in the context of honor, morality, and reproduction. Women bodies are often placed as a symbolic bearer of cultural continuity and social order, which makes them a subject to constant surveillance and control. These controls go beyond the physical to emotional, sexual, and reproductive aspects of the life of women, and in most cases, limit their freedom and choice (Grulich et al., 2025). In this socio-cultural context, literature turns out to be a strategic place of analyzing the ways in which these control mechanisms are internalized, challenged and rethought. New Pakistani English novels, especially, provide subtle accounts of embodied experiences of women, as they mediate between the pressures of tradition and modernity, personal desire and social demand, silence and struggle (Kuyucu, 2025).

The Pakistani English fiction is important because it is simultaneously placed in the local cultural realities and global literary and feminist discourses. Writing in English enables Pakistani novelists to interact with the global audience and also critically examine the native social constructs that govern the lives of women. These novels frequently preempt the domestic arena of marriage, family and motherhood and expose the way power is exercised in the presumably personal realms. Meanwhile, they also disrupt monolithic images of Pakistani women by introducing female characters of complexity, contradiction, and agency. These texts reveal the psychological and emotional effects of bodily regulation through narrative techniques that stress interiority and memory, as well as embodied suffering (Tappel, 2025). As a result, modern Pakistani English novels are not only the mirrors of social norms but the spaces of ideological criticism where mainstream patriarchal discourses are challenged and shaken (Bano, 2025).

The major constructs in this research are three which are interconnected and include bodily regulation, reproductive power, and female agency. Bodily regulation means the social and cultural procedures where the physical selves of women are disciplined, monitored and controlled according to the patriarchal rules. These are expectations about sexuality, modesty, marriage, fertility, and maternal behavior, which all support gender hierarchies. Reproductive power, which is closely connected with bodily regulation, involves the biological ability of women to reproduce and symbolic meanings of motherhood and fertility. Reproductive power can be easily usurped by institutions of family, community, and states in patriarchal societies, and turned into a tool of control, which places women in specific positions (Amadiume, 2024). In this context, female agency is not the notion of utter freedom but the ability to act, make decisions and negotiate under restrictive frameworks. Agency can be overt or subtle and can be expressed through negotiation, emotional perseverance and self-assertion that subvert prevailing gender ideologies (Hu, 2025).

The connection between the regulation of the body, reproductive power and female agency is dialectical. Patriarchal systems are based on the control of the female body to naturalize the functions of reproduction and justify gendered division of labor. This dynamic is reflected in literature as it portrays the construction of marriage and motherhood as mandatory identities that

curtail the freedom of women. Nevertheless, even modern Pakistani novels demonstrate how the same places of control may turn into resistance. There is a tendency of feminine characters to redefine motherhood, challenge marriage, or claim their bodies in a manner that challenges the norm (Hu, 2025). According to this play, reproductive power is not only an oppressing mechanism but also a possible empowering factor, depending on the manner in which it is negotiated and retold. Through these relationships, the study brings out the role of agency that arises through the constant interaction with and not total rejection of the patriarchal structures (Simon & Hasan, 2025).

The concept of body politics and the postcolonial feminist theory are the main theoretical foundations of the given study. Postcolonial feminism is a critique of universalist feminist discourses, in which the historical and cultural specificity of the experience of women in the former colonized society is stressed. It attracts the focus on the intersection of colonial legacies, nationalism, religion, and class with gender to create unique modes of bodily control (Vidyanita, 2025). The politics of the body also explains how power is exercised by controlling the physical and reproductive abilities and making the female body a contentious arena of ideological conflict. The body in literary works is a form of narrative which expresses the wider social fears of the society enabling authors to reveal the contradictions and the violence of patriarchal structures. The combination of these theoretical lenses allows the study to place the contemporary Pakistani English novels in a more expansive feminist discourse and to be sensitive to local socio-cultural realities (Haideri, 2025).

Although the literature on Pakistani English literature continues to grow over time, most of the research work has been done in national identity, diaspora, extremism, and political violence, overlooking gendered and embodied experiences. Although they exist, feminist approaches to Pakistani fiction are inclined to deal with the issue of women oppression in general, without necessarily dwelling upon the particular processes of bodily regulation and reproduction control. In addition, reproductive power is often talked about as a social responsibility and not as an active point of power negotiation and resistance (Santamarina, 2025). It is also quite surprising that there is no significant body of analysis that focuses on the functioning of bodily regulation, reproduction, and agency in relation to one another in literary texts. This is the gap that restricts the knowledge of how literature criticizes patriarchy on the level of the body and how female agency is expressed in terms of embodied experience (Bano, 2025).

In addition, to a large degree, the current feminist literary critique favors blatant resistance, frequently ignoring the insidious, culturally implicated manifestations of agency that do not fit Western liberal feminist principles. In modern Pakistani novels, women often bargain power by negotiating silence, emotional stability, moral thinking and decision making based on relationships instead of overt revolt. These images disrupt dichotomous structures of oppression and liberation and show agency as a contingent and shifting process (Bano, 2025). Such subtle forms of agency have not been academically attended to, and that is a gap that this paper aims to fill by preempting the negotiations that women have with power in their bodies.

The research problem of the study is due to the lack of critical involvement in how modern

Pakistani English novels define the control of the female body and reproduction role, and how the representations are used to explain the female agency in the patriarchal society. Although literature is broadly accepted as an effective tool of social criticism, little has been done in terms of utilizing it to reveal the inner processes of bodily control and reproductive politics (Valles & Friedman, 2020). This disjunction blurs how literary narratives are part of the feminist discourse by disrupting the dominant ideologies and redefining the subjectivities of women. To solve this issue, one will have to conduct a narrow, theoretically conscious analysis that will prioritize embodied experiences of women in the interpretation of literature (Faella, Digennaro, & Iannaccone, 2025).

The relevance of this research is that it contributes to the feminist literature and postcolonial studies by providing a subtle analysis of bodily control and reproductive authority in Pakistani English fiction. The study contests the reductive portrayals of Pakistani women as passive victims or exceptional rebels by foregrounding the embodied experiences of women, which underscores the intricacy of negotiations with patriarchy by the women. It builds on the postcolonial feminist theory by demonstrating how agency is expressed in culturally specific settings, and thus opposes universalizations of emancipation (Udenigwe, Aubel, & Abimbola, 2026). The paper also highlights the importance of literature as a site of feminist resistance and proves that fictional texts have the power to challenge and disrupt established power relations.

The study has a wider cultural implication beyond its academic contribution by shedding light on how the dominion of the patriarch over the body of women is normalized and challenged in the day-to-day life. With the socio-political landscape of a world in which questions of the rights of women, their control over their bodies, and their choice of reproductive options are very controversial, such literary analyses provide good perspectives into the cultural imaginaries that form the collective consciousness. Through the analysis of contemporary Pakistani novels, the paper confirms the possibility of literature to encourage critical thinking and lead to the continuous debate on gender justice, independence, and social change.

2.0 Literature Review

The conceptual backgrounds of the study of how the bodies of women and their reproductive power as well as female agency are regulated in literary works are closely related to postcolonial feminist theory, body politics, and narrative theory. Postcolonial feminism challenges the mainstream Western feminist models by arguing that gendered oppression is historically and culturally situated, especially in the context of the formerly colonized countries where religion, colonial histories, and nationalism define the gender norms in unique manners. This theoretical orientation highlights the inscription of cultural meanings on the bodies of women in literature that is not just limited to the personal experience but also represents structural power relationships thus making the body itself a main locus of ideological conflict (Bashir & Naseem, 2025). Politics of the body, which is informed by the works of Foucault, frame power in terms of disciplinary mechanisms that govern the practices of the body, normative identities and the roles of reproduction, thereby emphasizing the ways in which the autonomy of the body is contested and produced in social hierarchies. Within the framework of the Pakistani literature written in English, these structures permit interrogation of how novels are articulations of gendered experiences as

cultural negotiations of autonomy, resistance, and conformity, and thus literature provides a critical site of exploration of the interaction of internalized norms and emancipatory discourses (Haideri, 2025).

The empirical literature on Pakistani fiction and gender is increasingly growing, which presents diverse interactions with patriarchy, body agency, and feminine subjectivity. As an example, the recent feminist literary criticism illustrates how the modern novels challenge the patriarchal power dynamics and preempt the female resistance. The analysis of a female agency as expressed by Sabyn Javeri in the study by Youseaf Khan and colleagues, shows that the feminist theory brings to light the nuances of female agency within the male-dominated sociopolitical realities, and that fiction may serve to portray both the systemic factors and the subversive ones, as a form of self-assertion. Likewise, Nazeer, Rahman, and Anees discuss the ways in which female characters in novels like *The Pakistani Bride* and memoir literature perceive their bodies as a battlefield with the cultural norms, revealing corporeal resistance to male domination and honor-related violence (Uskul & Cross, 2020). Such studies predetermine the bodily experiences not only as thematic content but as primary narrative resources by means of which social criticism is performed. Other authors of South Asian literary commentaries point out the way in which gender, power, and resistance constitute female subjectivity in English-language novels, and demonstrate how common tropes of oppression and rebellion run throughout the narrations of the region (Jaisinghani, 2025).

Other empirical studies explore particular processes like objectification and self-objectification in Pakistani fiction where the female characters internalize the social expectations and representations that diminish women to cultural symbols and not as independent subjects. To illustrate, a study of sexual and self-objectification in short stories by Pakistani female writers highlights the ubiquitous influence of patriarchal demands on women in terms of self-perception and self-conduct, in line with the general feminist critique of the male gaze and internalized standards. These observations echo psycho-feminist and intersectional theories that pay attention to the psychological impact of gendered power relations and the ways in which women identity is constructed with respect to socio-cultural demands (Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025). Taken together, this literature demonstrates the complex ways in which Pakistani English novels and short stories regulate the body, and how the body is represented as an agent, but much of this scholarship is still disjointed, existing within particular texts or thematic issues, and not having been brought together in a unified framework that explicitly links bodily regulation, reproductive power, and agency as mutually reinforcing constructivities (Bosstick, 2025).

Although these studies have contributed, there are still major gaps in the literature. First, although individual studies focus on the issues of patriarchal oppression, female resistance, or body politics in separate stories, there are no systematically conducted studies on the representation of reproductive roles and reproductive power (not objectification, or resistance) as key factors that simultaneously limit and empower the female agency in Pakistani English fiction. Second, despite the fact that some studies are concerned with bodily experience in particular novels, there is minimal compilation of how various narrative techniques, character lines, and

thematic patterns of various texts interactively express a subtle mapping of reproductive power as a disputed social space. Furthermore, most current literature focuses on obvious acts of resistance or thematic expressions of oppression, but lacks adequate theorization of the less noticeable, culturally subtextual kinds of agency that are produced through narrative form, affective persistence and relationship negotiation. This neglect restricts our knowledge of the role of literature in, and possibly changing, socio-cultural discourses of gender, bodies and autonomy (Akla, 2025).

In filling such gaps, the recent literature on the writing by Pakistani women highlights the changing literary traditions that predestinate the outcry of women and the opposition to the patriarchal standards. The contributions of Pakistani women to English literature are being worked on to point out how women writers have been able to express gender roles and literary traditions as a cultural negotiation of identity and power. These customs expose a direction in which the embodied experiences of women are more and more foregrounded, no longer as objects of male domination but as foci of critique, self-examination as well as imaginative restructuring. All of these developments lead to the necessity of an integrative analytical approach that locates bodily regulation and reproductive power in a larger theoretical framework of feminist resistance and postcolonial narrative practice.

3.0 Methodology

The paper takes a qualitative research methodology founded on in-depth textual studies of some of the current Pakistani novels written in English. The study explores the art of storytelling, character and plot development, and thematic aspects in terms of body control, reproduction, and female control through postcolonial feminist theory and the body politics. The texts chosen are discussed in their socio-cultural context to know how literature finds and opposes the prevailing patriarchal ideologies.

The methodology of close reading is used as the main tool to find the way the female bodies are inscribed with the cultural, religious, and political meanings. Focus is put on language, symbolism, and narrative voice to examine the ways in which power relations are incorporated when representing the bodies and experience of women. Intersections of gender with other areas of class and religion and nationhood are also analyzed, and the way they influence the access of women to autonomy and self-expression.

Placing the novels in the context of an overarching postcolonial and feminist discourse, the study exemplifies how the modern Pakistani English fiction is simultaneously reproducing and opposing the hegemony of femininity and bodily control mechanisms. This methodological approach enables a delicate approach to the various literary texts in question as places of critique, where female subjectivity is negotiated and alternative resistant, tenacious and agency narratives are created.

4.0 Findings and Results

4.1 Women's Bodies as Contested Sites of Power

The review creates the realization that the bodies of women in the modern Pakistani English novels are transformed into a disputable location where the social norms, moral expectations, and

power relationships are negotiated and enacted. In patriarchal socio-cultural systems, the female body is not considered as independent entity but a symbolic and material location, where the family humors, religious ethics, and nationhood are disciplined. The novels represent the way in which the bodies of women are arenas of control, discipline and surveillance that are projected on the larger systems of domination latent in the postcolonial societies.

The female body is also prone to a set of strict codes of behavior concerning sexuality, mobility, clothing as well as reproductive potential. These rules tend to be normalized culturally, by interpretation of religion, and familial requirements, and doing the opposite would be challenging and socially unsafe. Through foregrounding bodily experiences, the plots reveal that power should not be seen solely in the coercion of other people by open means, but also through internalized practices and morality. The bodies are thus represented in the novels as a central arena that ideological battles of conformity and autonomy are fought.

Notably, such representations oppose the concept of body as an object that is passive. Rather, there is an unveiling of the body as a site of negotiations of which women are reacting to, redefining, and sometimes even challenging patriarchal norms through the texts. The novels highlight the subtle manifestations of how power is imprinted on the lives of women through uncomfortable depiction of physical and emotional experiences.

4.2 Regulation of Female Sexuality and Moral Surveillance

The female sexuality control is one of the most outstanding examples of the control over the body described in the novels. Sexual behavior is a highly politicized aspect since women are strictly observed as the bearers of family honor and moral respectability. The stories explain how perceptions of chastity, modesty and obedience limit the choice and define identities of women. Feminine sexuality is a concept that has to be tamed to ensure social order whereas transgression by the male is not necessarily noticed or addressed.

This kind of moral surveillance is not only restricted to the physical actions but also encompasses the thoughts, feelings, and desires of the women. These norms are internalized leading to feelings of guilt, fear and self-censorship and this shows how patriarchal power works both at the external and psychological levels. By showing the confusion and the doubts of the women, the novels emphasize the venomous quality of such subjugation that makes the opposition emotionally difficult and full of repercussions.

Simultaneously, the readings undermine the prevailing ethical structures since they expose their inconsistencies and inequalities. The novels demonstrate the overwhelmingly unequal load of moral codes on women and exoneration on the male gender through ironic tones of narration, fractured storylines and reflective character descriptions. By so doing, the stories challenge the moral responsibility as unevenly assigned, and they undermine the legality of norms according to which women ought to have their bodies controlled.

4.3 Marriage as an Instrument of Bodily Control

Marriage comes out as one of the central institutions whereby the bodies of women are disciplined. As one of the themes of analyzing the novels, marriage is often depicted as a domain of emotional satisfaction but as a mechanism that supports gender orders and inhibits the

independence of women. The bodies of women are redirected out of the patriarchal control to the control of the marriage with the focus on continuity and not liberation. The demand to live up to their defined expectations of being a wife is usually accompanied by emotional work, sexual accessibility and self-sacrifice.

The novels portray marriage, the place where individuality of women is absorbed within the family and societal demands. The female characters are supposed to place the marriage peace over the individual ambitions at the expense of their bodies and minds. The body is turned into a property to be exploited- by means of reproduction, house work and sexual submission which highlights the exploitation of women in patriarchal systems.

Nevertheless, the stories do not accept romanticized images of marriage either as they predetermine dissatisfaction and discontent in women. Female characters are defiant in their indirect manners through the silence, avoidance, and refusal to have an emotional response. These depictions contravene mainstream cultural discourses that discuss marriage as a natural and inevitable outcome of women, and as a social institution that tends to limit the body and emotional autonomy of women.

4.4 Motherhood and Reproductive Expectations

Another important location of bodily control in the novels is motherhood. The reproductive capacity is often presented as the main symbol of female value, downgrading women to their biological processes. In the stories, the pressure to have children (especially sons) within the society restricts the agency within women and contributes to their subordination in the family aspects. When they do not comply with reproductive expectations then they will be stigmatized, marginalized, or abused emotionally.

The novels are critical of this idealization of motherhood in that they expose its weight and complications. Although motherhood is an act that provides honor and fulfillment to the culture, its forceful nature is revealed in the texts especially when the only body part that is cherished by women is the reproductive productivity. This diminishing women identity to motherhood disfigures desires, ambitions and subjectivities of women.

However, the stories do not completely deny motherhood; on the contrary, it is redefined in a less obvious manner. There are those female characters who find motherhood a place of emotional attachment and empowerment and those who find motherhood as an entrapment. The novels challenge homogenized images of motherhood by offering a variety of experiences of motherhood but emphasize the importance of accepting women enacting reproductive decisions as choices instead of compulsory.

4.5 Female Agency and Subtle Forms of Resistance

Even with the systems of control that are wide, women are still shown as active rather than passive victims in the novels. Women agency is created in the form of small, daily actions that defy the patriarchal authority without necessarily going into direct conflict with it. These are self reflection, emotional endurance, strategic silence and developing inner autonomy. These types of opposition can be quite subtle but they are still significant methods by which women can reassert their bodies and identities.

The concept of self-awareness is very significant in these stories because the female characters start to notice the systems that hold them down. This awareness allows them to challenge the socializing norms and redefine themselves without socializing roles. Specifically, emotional strength turns out to be a potent instrument with the help of which women are able to sustain themselves in an oppressive state, but maintain their dignity and self-worth.

The novels are defying traditional agency definitions that favor open rebellion by appreciating these insidious kinds of resistance. They instead offer a more accommodating concept of resistance, which takes into consideration the realities of women who live within oppressive conditions, with survival in itself being a form of resistance.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyze how women bodies, reproductive roles and agency are represented in the current Pakistani English novels in the context of postcolonial feminist theory and body politics. The discussion shows that the bodies of women act as highly politicized and conflictual places where patriarchal ideologies, moral discourses and socio-cultural power relations are practiced and reproduced. Through the embodied experiences of foregrounding, the chosen novels show how the structures of control over women bodies are core processes of perpetuating gender structures in the postcolonial societies.

The discussion points out that the institution of marriage and motherhood are at the heart of controlling female bodies and restricting women autonomy. Although these roles are socially acceptable and fitting, the narratives bring out the disciplinary aspects of the roles, especially when the identities of women are devalued into mere reproductive and domestic roles. The study demonstrates that moral surveillance, expectations of sexual propriety, and reproductive pressure are some of the stakeholders that together limit the physical, emotional, and psychological space of women through close textual analysis. By so doing, the novels contend the mainstream cultural discourses which condition women to be lived by pointing out the interiorized effects of such a norm.

Meanwhile, the results make such a victim-centered interpretation of female characters difficult. Instead of describing women as the inactive objects of oppression only, the novels always describe different ways of agency and resistance. Women characters enact power in terms of self-awareness, emotional strength, silence and selective compliance, and in moments of overt disobedience. Even minor acts or limited ones, these acts break the patriarchal norm and destabilize strict gender roles. The research thereby endorses post-colonial feminist arguments that agency can only be conceptualized within context specific constraints as opposed to being quantified through open defiance.

Notably, the reading highlights how narrative strategies can be used to express resistance. The novels give voice to the women, their experiences that are usually on the outskirts of the mainstream discourses through fragmented narration, interior monologues and embodied views. Literature can be a valuable site on which alternative images of femininity can be envisioned and what is deemed as normalcy about women bodies and roles can be challenged. In this aspect, Pakistani English fiction of the contemporary world does not merely mirror the social realities, but it is also involved in the cultural critique.

To sum up, this research paper adds to the current body of knowledge by showing that literary depiction of the female body can be used to reveal the greater systems of power in Pakistani postcolonial society. Placing the regulation of the body in crosscutting gender, cultural and power systems, the study exposes the layers of the experience of women and the importance of literature as a place of resistance and rewriting. Although this paper is restricted by a chosen set of novels, it provides prospects of further studies on the comparative literature of regions, the literature on male and female writers and the development of female agency in South Asian fiction. In the end, the paper confirms that the analysis of body politics in literature is critical in comprehending how gendered identities are produced, challenged, and modified on a postcolonial setting.

Contribution

Faheem Arshad: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Afsar Ali: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Nimra Javaid: Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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