

**Negotiating Gender, Religion, and State Power: Feminist Literary Responses to Islamization in Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq**

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**Abstract**

The Islamization era of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) was a turning point in Pakistan's political life in which the government used religious rhetoric as a tool to reinforce its authoritarianism. Gendered subordination took the form of religion in legislation like the Hudood Ordinances, the Law of Evidence, making women's bodies and personhood a central battleground in the regime's overall ambition to govern on behalf of Islam. This article looks at the ways in which women writers of the time challenged this official mode of thinking, in works characterized by acts of body, language and interiority. In rejecting a marginal protest reading of this literature as a marginal protest, the article suggests that it was a substantive counter-discourse which took on the state's discursive terrain and challenged the unification of religious and political power from the inside. This literary piece addresses issues of gender, religion and state power not as mutually exclusive or opposing binary codes, but as a terrain of negotiation that is continually opened in collective resistance movements like the Women's Action Forum. The article, in sum, advances the historiography of postcolonial feminist literature, a critical perspective that will help to make sense of women's writing as a form of political challenge to authoritarian religious authority, an approach with many implications for feminist history in the Muslim world and others in which religious authority is authoritarian.

**Keywords:** Islamization, Gender, Religion, Feminist Literary Resistance, State Power, Hudood Ordinance, Discourse And Resistance

**Introduction**

The period between 1977 and 1988 of General Zia-ul-Haq's military regimes in Pakistan was indeed one of the most disturbing in Pakistan's recent history in terms of the roles played by women, religion and state. Zia's government was proactively involved in the Islamization, and its overt aim was to push the legal, education and culture system of Pakistan in the direction of "state sanctioned" Islamic interpretation. The involvement of women in this project was unique and special. During this time, legislation, such as the Hudood Ordinances of 1979 and the Law of Evidence of 1984, affected the legal status of women with respect to testimony, criminal liability and bodily autonomy, bringing a gendered hierarchy right into the apparatus of the state (Jalal, 1991; Talbot, 2012). During this period, considerable literature emerged in which women writers were explicitly engaged with the conditions sought by Zia's government. This literature was in the form of poetry, short fiction, essays, and personal narratives, which was shared through publishing houses, publishing women's journals, literary journals, and activist circles which were often the same ones to be censured and under state surveillance. This article does not analyze this piece of

literature as an "additional analysis" this time but as a meaningfully space of political debate. It aims to shed light on how literary language during this time functioned as a counter hearing against the gender, religious and state power, as well as how it navigated the relationship between these powers and what was possible and impossible in cultural production under them.

There are several steps to the argument. It starts with setting the historical and legal background to Islamization as it reconstructs the legal personhood of women through certain laws. It then constructs a theoretical model of how literary production is more a matter of contestation than of external protest. The middle portion of the article focuses on three interlapping ways in which literature struggled for and against state power physically, through opposition to language, and psychologically, through interiority before finally discussing the connections between individual literary writing and organized collective activism. They are then contextualized by wider feminist debates around secular and religious feminist perspectives in Pakistan and the comparative and the historiographical significance of this context for the study of gender in religio-political authoritarianism. This question is inspired by a lack of scholarly work. Historical and legal documentation of the process of Islamization, and the aesthetic and political examination of feminist Urdu poetry and prose separately, was a thorough process. Less studied is the connective link between the two types of writing the ways in which the language of literature came into engagement with, was reworked, and destabilized the language of the state's own religion and law. The following article does this by studying legal history and literary production through their entanglements and contestations in what is not a distinct space of political and cultural production.

### **Historical and Legal Context**

In July 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq ruled through a military coup, deposed the elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In the years thereafter his regime practiced Islamization, as an ideology and as a justification for political authority; his legitimation of political power was to be found in religious authority, in the divine to compensate for an electoral lapse. The regime gained a hold on the countries without a constitutional process, so they needed something to graft onto that would provide a basis of their legitimacy this is where the religious duty of legitimacy was ideally located. It might then be read as an eagerness to accept state commands, but a higher power and obviously unchallenged (Jalal, 1991; Talbot, 2012). Hudood Ordinances of 1979 incorporated changes into the criminal law, such as the concept of "zina" (adultery and fornication) and the use of alcohol, that were in line with a specific interpretation of Islamic penal law. In the practical application of the ordinances, there are greater hurdles to successfully follow up on a complaint of sexual violence, including sometimes additional hurdles placed on victims of sexual violence. In certain cases, a woman who alleges she was raped, but does not meet the stringent evidentiary requirements to secure a conviction may be subject to accusations of unlawful sexual relations. Consequently, the legislation designed to alleviate sexual crimes was the basis for a great deal of controversy among the legal profession and among activists for the rights of women (Kennedy, 1996; Lau, 2006). The Law of Evidence was enacted in 1984, adding to the process of formalizing gender issues and giving women and men inequalities in the weights of their evidence in many economic and financial negotiations. It can be seen as a state-imposed rehabilitation of the gender order, along with other constraints placed on women's public presence due to governmental cultural projects and education. It was by no means just about gaining a legal status; it was essentially about redefining the role of women in the public sphere, from the then religious power, perspective (Jalal, 1991; Shaikh, 2009).

This reconstruction of the Pakistani state has been embedded in a broader spectrum of state formation which also involved obtaining legitimacy of women's voices and public presence in Pakistan (Jalal 1991). Similarly, in the period of Islamization under Zia's leadership, the process involved not only with legislation, but also an attempt on the part of the Islamists to change public

culture, social norms and national identity (Talbot 2012). Protection of Women right and their representation became the main arena in which opposing intentions with respect to religion, citizenship and the authority of the State were expressed. By scholars of the time, it is also exhibited that the process of Islamization extended on the criminal law. The reforms encompassed the reform of educational curricula and media policy, and of economic discourse and overall understanding of 'nationality' shows that Islamization was not limited to women but measured in the political and cultural agenda of reform (Kennedy, 1996; Shaikh, 2009; Talbot, 2012). In this respect, the Hudood Ordinances and the Law of Evidence were not simply laws they were important instruments which the regime deployed in articulating and establishing the religious legitimacy of the state. The issue of the status of women became visible on the public sphere as a demonstrative indicator of the State's commitment to the Islamization policy, and the gender as such issues were directly connected to the broader issues of political power, religious legitimacy and the national identity (Jalal, 1991; Shaikh, 2009). It is worth recalling that religious texts and the law were not only divisive at this time but were already difficult areas. Not all accepted the and disputed the arguments underlying Islamic laws that were included in the Hudood Ordinances. Religious scholars, legal experts and women's rights activists made presentations and participated in discussion on theological and practical considerations of religious values and gender equality in a law and women rights perspective (Lau, 2006; Zia, 2018). This is because the notion of religious authority was not 'natural' but rather was constructed in a legal and political fashion. This is a point of contestation, deconstruction and critique that was later capitalized on by feminist writers of the time in poetry, fiction, journalism, and activist writing.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of postcolonial period and its attitudes towards literary production and state power is taken from the postcolonial feminist literary theory. The process does not assume religion and feminism are politically antithetical and can be read as two opposing discourses, but assumes they are both textual, and may be read politically in multiple ways for interpretation, negotiation and contestation. Acknowledging postcolonial feminist scholars is appropriately appraising the lived experiences of women in non-Western societies within the historical, cultural and political context with which they are associated and not abstractionally describing women's experience of oppression in Western societies (Mohanty, 2003). This would be particularly useful when it comes to the period of Islamization in Pakistan, where the themes of 'gender', 'religion' and 'nationhood' were very connected to each other. Saigol's book on nationalism and gender in Pakistan highlights the image of women as carriers of nationhood and religions in Pakistan. Competing political projects have inscribed labile meanings far beyond experiences of Pakistan's women into their bodies, behaviors and functions since the very establishment of the country. Gender has become a social category and a central point of contestation for issues of legitimacy, citizenship, morality and 'nationality' (Saigol, 2016). In this way, the body and behavior of women are at the heart of the practices of exercising, contesting and creating state power.

In the context of her scholarship on feminism and Islam in Pakistan, Afiya Shehrbano Zia gives another perspective to the reactions of Pakistani women to the state's drive of Islamization. Zia believes that feminist approaches to religion can be traced from overt challenge to religion-based oppression and discrimination, to attempts of re-thinking the religious discourse from within the church to achieve gender justice and women's rights (Saigol, 2016). Such is the case with literary texts studied in this article, which present some text gaps. However, there were also female writers who were not against the use of religious terms, but who rearranged and reconceptualized religious terminology by uncovering the conflict between how the state represented itself as Islamizing and how women lived who were affected by it. However, it is important to focus on literary War of Women during the era of Zia also in relation to women movement in Pakistan. As a result of legal

discrimination, censorship and authoritarianism, women's organizations, intellectual and literary societies formed, seeking new paths to political expression. These activists and writers weren't just using models of the imported feminist, but they were saying things that engaged with contestation of local history and social conditions, effectively making them critical of their local surroundings. Earlier, literature was published as an essential space for 'miming' and 'proclaiming' other citizenships, other justice, other gender, and other religions (Khan, 2018).

Second, as an article theorizing, discourse is not only a discipline or any specific political topic: it's a contested field. A claim to religious authority was not something that the Zia regime could now give once and for all; it was a political project for which it had to continually assert itself through legislation, schooling, the press, popular culture. All these types of projects are repurposed and always opposed. What has been used to justify gender hierarchy and inequity is also applicable in challenging the hierarchy and inequity. The article in this case then takes the perspective of feminist literary production as one of the main frames within which religious and political discourse was challenged, redefined and redeemed. These have three implications for the following analysis. first, it does not leave two categories behind: feminist literature and religious discourse: it is an interpretive way these two continue to negotiate when some literature is quite critical of the state policies. Secondly, it recognizes literature language as a vehicle of political intervention rather than a mirror of the political events taking place in other political areas. Third, it provides the time to reflect on the psychological and interior requirements of women's writing as a private and apolitical matter, but as a crucial way of confronting the power structures that sought to govern both outer and inner life.

### **Literary Resistance: modes of negotiation**

There were various and inter-dependent modes of resistance in literary responses to Islamization under the Zia period. When writing was assumed by women, it did more than assert resistance; it also offered novel forms and contexts to shed light on and to challenge the dominant discourses of gender, religion, and authority. Women writers took on resistance strategies of poetry, fictions, memoir and personal reflection to challenge state control of women's identities and experiences. The following section discusses three significant types of literary resistance - bodily assertion, linguistic defiance, and psychological interiority - each of which is a different means through which the body of women writers asserts the negotiation of the ideology and legislation of the Islamization period.

### **Bodily Assertion**

The most obvious ways of literary feministic protest during the Zia era were that of claiming the body of the woman as an appropriate subject of literary representation. Bodies were sites of resistance for a group of women writers in a time that sought to curtail women's mobility, presence and sexuality. Poets and prose writers such as Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed questioned the familiar with medias leading a reaction questioning the assumptions about women as passive, uninvented subjects that define their identity in terms of modesty, obedience and domesticity. Instead, they imagined it to be a space of experience, desire, memory and resistance in the female body. The emphasis on embodiment was especially significant in the political climate set up by the Hudood Ordinances, which are based on the law system. This focus on embodiment was particularly important in the political context created by the Hudood Ordinances, that was grounded in the law system. The issue of consent and sexuality were framed as an issue of sexual morality, put on legal control, the female body became the object of the state's power. Literary depictions of body experience can thus not be considered solely as expressions of personal autonomy, but as responses to a legal and ideological framework which aimed at defining women's identities through legal interpretations of the concepts of morality and religion. In participating in

the writing of the body, women writers challenged and protested the process of making the feminine invisible in public discourse and the attempt to have others write the feminine story (Anantharam, 2009; Basra et al., 2022). Body assertion meant more than just sex. The relationship between embodiment of experience and social engagement and visibility was frequently the subject of women writing. Women's demands for citizenship and autonomy were symbolized by the freedom to speak, express themselves, and live openly in public space. The recording of actual experiences was, thus, connected with the general campaigns for the role of women in political activism, for their claims for legal recognition and for their public lives, which took place during the Islamization period (Yaqin, 2022).

### **Linguistic Defiance**

Another form of resistance was through language. However, instead of abandoning the whole field of religion and culture, many female writers dialogued with it in a significant way, attempting to use and make sense of it in their opposition to the legitimization discourse of a particular state policy. New images, symbols and traditions of religion, nationalism and culture challenged the official narrative and developed alternative narratives and notions of justice, dignity and equality (Anantharam, 2009; Zia, 2018). This was extremely significant as it was acknowledgement that meaning was not an exclusively state or religious enterprise. Women writers addressed the religious issues directly, and demonstrated that truths such as justice, moral and faith are not picked and decided by official proclamation. Their writing captured the gap between claims of religious legitimacy and those who are victims of discriminatory legislation and social practices towards women (Zia, 2018). One case is the poetry of Kishwar Naheed, for which special emphasis has been chosen here in this regard. She is frequently employing irony and satire along with symbolic ways of reading religion/culture as a deconstruction of the male's prerogative, and of woman as the speaking subject. Naheed's poetry resists dominant narratives, revealing and challenging common religious and cultural tropes (He & Iftikhar, 2024).

The formality of literary language was an insurrectionary language too. Traditional forms of poetry and literary tradition were all transformed to 'create' the psalms for the contemporary world's politics. Traditional poetry and literary conventions were all adapted to respond to today's politics. As the process unfolds, women writers came up with a new literary language at the extremes: a cultural language, and a questioning of the uses of culture. The hybridity is significant in the context of the feminist literary opposition during the Zia period, a political period which saw the opposition not wrestling with culture or religion but rather reinterpretation, transformation and subversion (Anantharam, 2009; Yaqin, 2022).

### **Psychological Interiority**

Other way of resistance - investigation of psychological interiority. Both, many female writers, being compelled to view themselves, have voiced their emotional and psychological responses to the presence of a censorship, surveillance and uncertainty regarding the law. They explored fear, isolation, alienation, anxiety, memory and selfhood, revealing elements that presented a different way of that exercise of authority which were not unambiguously state sanctioned. It has in some respects been regarded as too private and apolitical. Today, however, the study of scholarship is not only respectful of the possibility of psychological/emotional dimensions becoming a powerful political voice. In having their characters record the subjective realities of their lives and the consequences of social and legal regulation, women writers exposed the working of power, both in terms of institutions and of law, but also in terms of the realities of daily life (Waheed, 2022; Zia, 2018). Sara Shagufta is relevant to this context. Her poetry is elusive and cannot be easily described as one of fragmentation, suffering, identity, and struggle. Although this type of writing usually has been approached in the past in a manner focused on the unstable nature of the personal

self or biography, it is possible to read them more contextually. This kind of writing has been read for the most part as a writing of the unstable subject or as a biographical one; it may be read differently, however, as a contextual reading. Recent studies, however, have investigated Shagufta's political dimensions, stating that her explorations of psychological pain and suffering were not personal but rather about social and cultural issues at large (Waheed, 2022; Yaqin, 2022). The analysis of psychological interiority as a type of resistance thus takes to task other binary oppositions such as personal/political. Experiences of emotion and of psychologically are where women are writing about the effects of social control and expressing ways of criticism that may not be possible to state politically. Much like the phrase "alternative sexuality," the concept of interiority does not denote "withdrawal" but of being "politically engaged" in this way.

### **Literature and Collective Resistance**

There was no "production" of individual Literary voices without relation to each other. They grew in the context of other feminist movements and movements that were against the negative effects of Islamization policies. Among the most powerful networks established, was the Women's Action Forum (WAF) formed in the wake of the Hudood Ordinances and other laws impacting on legal and social rights of the women in 1981. Around an attack on gender-based discrimination by a group of writers, lawyers, academics, journalists and activists, WAF became one of the most dynamic organizations of the women movement in Pakistan (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Khan, 2018). Print has played an important role in sustaining this continual resistance as a study of the women's movement in history reveals. Literary journals, newsletters, pamphlets and independent publications provided the activists with a vehicle for which to air their thinking, highlight injustice, and mobilize public opinion. Literary and cultural production was important means of expressing and disseminating alternative perspectives, especially in a political climate where assemblies were subject to limitations and there was censorship (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

The interaction between literary activity and political organizing are also depicted in Khan's report on the Women Action Forum. Often writers were directly involved in activist campaigns, and activists were involved in literary publications. The separation of cultural production and political involvement was not as clear. Lit works were not just about celebrating art and social justice issues but also educating people on the law and feminist consciousness (Khan, 2018). This connection poses problems in who can be considered a personal artist in the feminist texts. Poems, essays and short stories were read alongside the organization of demonstrations and the support of women whose rights were affected by discriminatory laws and the participation of international public in debates on human rights and gender justice were spread across the same networks. The activity of writing literature and engaging in political resistance were therefore complementary aspects of a larger resistance campaign (Khan, 2018; Zia, 2018). Literature itself was not the only thing that was impacted by influence. Rhetorical uses of literary language affected the arguments of feminist activism, providing symbols, metaphors, and narratives to public statements, petitions, protest campaigns. Like in women's poetry and prose, the same religious and nationalist discursive vocabulary was adopted by activists in their pursuit of a common discursive strategy when making an appeal in both the literary and political sphere. The fact that this convergence exists reinforces the view that literary and political opposition to Islamization must be viewed not as a phenomenon of a singular nature but as linked symbols of a much larger struggle involving the themes of gender, citizenship, religious control and state power in Pakistan.

### **Discussion**

This study shows literary texts that give rise to feminist resistance during the Islamization period is not just a resistance against state power. Many women writers, instead of completely outside of the religious/nationalistic discourse, critically responded to the language in which the state was

legitimizing its policies. They opposed existing definitions of morality, justice, and gender and simultaneously took these ideas as loci of other meanings. In this regard, literary resistance was more about contestation of the meaning and possession of the religious than about a denial of it. The discovery presents a fresh dilemma for the mainstream notion of the association of feminism and religion in Pakistan. The works of literature mentioned here demonstrate a variety of approaches which were not exclusively secular or religious in their interpretations. The strategies writers often took were contextually flexible and required a range of religious and non-religious vocabulary to make assertions about dignity, equality and justice. The level of complexity indicates that literary expression could often find itself in an intermediate space between the formal political discourse and therefore challenge the state without adopting the boundaries imposed by official discourse (Zia, 2018). Another limitation of authoritarian production of culture is emphasized. While the Zia regime sought to harness public discourse for its agenda, it tried to control it with censorship, laws, and 'ideological campaigns,' literature was an important venue for criticism and negotiation. Women authors kept composing texts that challenged internal tensions in state policies and recorded their impact on people's lives. The literary interventions show how, under extreme political constraints, cultural production can generate spaces of resistance. Lastly, literary analysis and the history of women's activism suggest there is a strong connection between cultural and political forms of resistance. Literature was not a self-contained entity, but rather it engaged with other feminist forms of mobilization as it negotiated ideas, symbols, and narratives. Because of this relationship, it seems that the study of literary history and political history is best viewed as two facets of the same historical movement (Khan, 2018).

### **Significance of comparative and historiographical approaches.**

The relevance of this research goes beyond the sphere of Pakistan during General Ziaul Haq. An authoritarian government's need to legitimize its power in a way that can be expressed through the management of women and gender and women's resistance via cultural and literary means can be traced across different historical and geographical contexts. Finally, analyzing the Pakistani case is relevant in broader discussion about the link between gender, religion and state power in an authoritarian context. The results from this postcolonial feminist point of view highlight the necessity to examine women's resistance in its cultural and historical context. Many of the literary responses reviewed here were produced in specific political contexts; they can hardly be taken up in general terms of oppression or emancipation. Rather they depict the ways in which women claim power in locally specific expressions, symbolism and critique (Mohanty, 2003). The study also enriches the Pakistani feminist history by proving the significance of using literary analysis along with the legal and political history of the study. There has been much scholarship on Islamization as a legal-political process, or as a literary-cultural phenomenon. The collection of these domains offers a glimpse into the dynamic interactions between state policies and literature. In such a way, it creates a broader picture of the situation of feminist resistance and mirrors the studies efforts to show that literature is not only a reflection of but a player in historical change (Saigol, 2016). Furthermore, the literary tactics of the article can be a helpful analytical framework for women's writing in other eras of the history of Pakistan. The ongoing relevance of their work indicates interesting continuities in the feminist critique of issues of identity and authority and social justice.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, the writer has studied the nature of literature and how it played a significant role in opposing the General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies from 1977 till 1988, to conclude that literature was one important area of opposition to the government's gendered reconstruction of the society. Females' writers presented challenging alternative discourses of gender and the social and political impacts of Islamization through assertions of body, defiance of language and

psychological interiors. The analysis shows the feminist literary resistance of this time to be nonaggression rather than opposition. Women writers made claims to the contrary, reflecting, reinterpreting, and contesting the meanings of religious and national concepts they did not simply turn a blind eye to religious and national discourse. In a repressive political climate, their work brought new opportunities for feminist expression and played part in the feminist movement for gender justice. These interventions in the literature speak with the volume of the Women's Action Forum, making them understandably easy to connect with literary activities of other groups. In addition to revealing political opposition, literature was instrumental in establishing the vocabulary, symbols, and thoughts that were used to voice opposition. The study concludes by a discussion of the need to read literary and political history side by side. To do so offers a deeper insight into women's attempts to negotiate power, to question authority and to forge a different conception of justice in one of the most important eras in Pakistan's modern history. The current framework can be extended by future research, to identify other instances of literary resistance in other historical periods or by studying how these strategies are still active when it comes to contemporary feminist texts in Pakistan.

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