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AGENCY, GENDER, NATIONALISM, AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINARY IN PAKISTAN

Abu-Bakar Ali

This chapter will explore Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman* (2001), which, beside selected material from author-activist Fahmida Riaz and a consideration of contemporary anglophone writers Shaila Abdullah and Kamila Shamsie, will form the basis for an engagement with the romance genre in the writing of Pakistani women. The development of mass media in the nascent Pakistani nation is characterised by the emergence of one particular generic form that continues to be, by far, the most popular. The romance narrative, whether in its classic or family guise, dominates Pakistani television in epic, panoramic dramas and is, more significantly, voraciously consumed when it appears in its most ubiquitous literary form, serialised in newspapers and magazines targeted at women.¹ *The Holy Woman* retrospectively reimagines the period against which the burgeoning popularity of the romance will be contextualised; a period in which Riaz also makes political inscriptions. The copious pseudo-novels which were serialised during the especially significant Zia period were published in Urdu and, given Pakistan's fragile archival resources, are notoriously difficult to obtain. Writers such as Shahraz, Shamsie, and Abdullah refashion the genre with sufficient nostalgia, referentiality, and, in the case of Riaz, epistemological and political consciousness, to shine a light on the way the relationship between 'national culture', feminism, and romance literature can be read against the wider backdrop of Pakistan's fractious history. There are several interesting issues to consider here. Rather than focus on whether agency is ever possible in the discourses of Pakistani romance novels, it is more fruitful to look at why the recurring tropes of the popular romance genre, which appear in Shahraz's work and in the diasporic fiction of Abdullah and Shamsie, are as widely successful as they have been.

It may appear peculiar to employ the generic discourse of romance literature as a repository in feminist debates on nationalism and the effect of nationalist ideologies on gendered expressions of sexuality, class, and (most significantly) agency, in a Pakistani context. Romance narratives do seem to have something of an image problem in this sense. As Janice Radaway explains in her seminal study on romance literature, 'Elaborate female fantasies' notwithstanding, readers are 'in effect, instructed about the nature of patriarchy and its meanings for them as women' (1991: 149). Ominously, the ideologies that pervade the text's easily identifiable generic

conventions 'evoke the material consequences of refusal to mould oneself in the image of femininity prescribed by the culture but also displays the remarkable benefits of conformity' (Radaway 1991: 149). And, presumably, these 'benefits' can be found in the pleasures that accrue from reading such a text and sharing in the 'female fantasy' where 'the heroine is gathered into the arms of the hero' (Radaway 1991: 149). These pleasures thus paradoxically bring the female reader back into the patriarchal fold, expressing her hopes and dreams, her agency, through the very ideological framework that would curtail such aspirations. Needless to say, the kind of readership relevant to this chapter has a very different history and epistemology to the bored, suburban white middle-class housewife of middle America. Very little research has been conducted on the way popular romance is played out across both literary and theoretical postcolonial discourses, let alone a further consideration of postcolonial feminisms. The question is not one of cultural relativity, but how representations of feminist agency within Pakistani romance texts provide continuity with the country's past, a past nationalist in hue, tainted by the violence inflicted on scores of women.

The narrative of romance appears to pan out in the following way: a strong-willed and assertive woman vows that she can exist without (heterosexual) love; she meets an equally stubborn man who apparently does not know how to love; he exhibits crude, even violent behaviour towards the heroine and, as they both struggle with various obstacles that include their own insecurities, the hero realises that said heroine is the one he 'loves', climaxing in her being 'gathered' into his now more than welcome embrace (Chaney 1979). As far as agency is concerned, it is a case of 'now you see it, now you don't'. The text performs its own Foucauldian manoeuvre, producing ideological opposition to its patriarchal discourse in the form of a vaguely feminist heroine, and then consuming the subversion it has created in those all-enveloping 'arms'. 'Love' is expressed in that familiar discourse of 'chivalry', a representational device that effaces the female epistemology once again. Agency becomes a kind of strained, lost fantasy, effaced between violence and 'protection'. In 1984, Janice Radaway published her theoretical observations in a groundbreaking ethnographic research project she had undertaken. Basing herself in the small but affluent city of Smithton, North Carolina, Radaway meticulously recorded the reading habits and practices of a group of women who were self-confessed romance novel aficionados. She discusses their preferences for the types of romance, genre characteristics that they like or dislike, and probes their responses, attempting to situate these, and the novels themselves, in a theoretical and ideological context. There are the obvious questions of how relevant a framework exploring Western romances and their effect on a small selection of women in the mid-West is to this task. As Radaway emphasises, the narrative trajectory of the type of texts the Smithton women consume is ideologically reflective of their interpellation. They accede to the politics at play but only because they recognise 'the remarkable benefits of' this 'conformity' (1991: 149). The perks of middle-class suburbia may not be the same as those available to the working-class Pakistani women who read romances, or even to those from the higher classes.

Romance at the limits: the strained interventions of Fahmida Raiz

The immediate task here is to interrogate exactly what sort of intervention romance literature represents in this young country's gendered history. Hence it is interesting to explore the position of romance tropes in the work of a prominent author and poet whose most influential pieces were produced within the very historical moment with which this chapter is concerned. The notorious period of General Zia's martial rule in Pakistan, swiftly followed after his death by democratic elections and the appointment of the country's first woman prime minister, saw an exponential rise in the amount of popular romances being consumed and written on the

Pakistani literary scene. The poems, political essays, and short stories of Riaz provide a unique counterpoint to the popular generic discourse of her time, as well as a lens through which Pakistani romance fiction's own intervention can be read both historically and in feminist terms. In the foreword to *Four Walls and Black Veils* (2005), Aamer Hussein describes the author and her literature in the following terms:

From the outset she refused to be typecast as a woman poet and conform to what are generally regarded as the confines of 'proper' literary and creative traditions of feminine poetry [...] she broke out of the inhibitions imposed on her gender.

(Riaz 2005a: 6)

Her writings were oppositional in every sense of the word. Riaz's politically charged repudiations of 'the inhibitions imposed on her gender' (2005a: 6) were not simply to be found in the political unconscious of allegorical fictions, they were dangerously critical of state and society. She was not only a poet and a writer but an activist, and the regime of the period in which she developed a political consciousness provided a target against which her intellectual sensibilities could be directed.

Initially, Riaz was influenced by her exposure to the Marxist political scene in London during the rise of Thatcherism in the late '70s. She became part of a growing middle-class intelligentsia who were mobilised by Zia's plans to hang the democratically elected Prime Minister Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto and seize power. This was a watershed in Riaz's life. She and her husband were imprisoned for inciting civil unrest and anarchy. Riaz was bailed by an admirer of her work and then chose to go into exile to India, under threat of house arrest. From the relative safety of her adopted home, her awareness as a feminist took shape, undoubtedly as a direct result of the stories of injustice and violence against women that were reaching her from across the border (Rahman 1991). General Zia had engaged familiar ideological tropes in a politics that associated all that was pure, and also by association impure in the parlous Pakistani state, with the symbolic and real female body.

Riaz's annexation of class and gender concerns raises some interesting complexities in her work. These are apparent in the short story 'Some Misaddressed Letters', written in exile. It narrates a story of displacement similar to her own, in which Amina, a female activist, and Murad, her male colleague, are sent to India but return to a politically chaotic and unstable Pakistan (Riaz 2005b). As Amina works through her memories, she finds that as a woman representing working-class causes she is the site of a curious double colonisation:

Amina was beginning to feel exhausted. She looked at the room, the flowers, the photograph of the Founding Father on the wall. She knew how he felt, knew that despite his affected mannerisms, he was really feeling sick at heart. [...] He was not frightened like Amina.

(Riaz 2005b: 98)

The site of this epiphany is the 'host country' of India, where Amina finds herself intellectually neutered, her offerings dismissed by the male intelligentsia as 'sincere attempts' (Riaz 2005b: 99). The author's gender here has problematised any routes to agency she may have attempted to fashion through a working-class position. But it is what happens next in the narrative that is most interesting from the perspective of romance conventions. Amina tackles the irreconcilability she is confronted with by nostalgically conjuring up an Indian man who could have been her lover, the subject of 'misaddressed letters' that she had composed and sent some years

ago: 'her love for this young man was like the legendary flame in the faraway place on which the washerman fixed his gaze' (Riaz 2005b: 97). And at this point the romance threatens to become a parody of itself, as this man emerges in a similar memory of Murad, in the form of the husband of a peasant woman he is about to make love to. Riaz employs romance conventions cleverly to traverse a multitude of points in Pakistani history where class and gender are far from frameworks that share common political ground. Feminist concerns and agency are produced as silence at each of these sites.

The period of the late 1970s to the cusp of the '80s provides the backdrop for this silencing and has been commonly historicised as one of the darker periods in Pakistan's already bloody history, shaped by ideologically marked discourses of gender. In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq seized power from the democratically elected incumbent, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in a bloodless military coup. The subsequent recriminations were unprecedented and saw a change in the cultural, social, and political terrains, as Sadia Toor articulates so well (2011: 161). After sanctioning the hanging of his political rival, Zia turned his attention to what was to be the bedrock of his political *modus operandi*: the reconstruction of the country's national identity. Ostensibly, the way the country's women were marginalised in such a refashioning does not appear surprising and simply seems to be a continuation of a common theme in nationalist politics: 'Zia attempted to secure his power through the propagation of an explicitly misogynist ideology and by proclaiming a mission to revitalise society by correcting the immorality of women' (Toor 2011: 160). Zia's state assumed the role of 'correcting' mechanism and this is where Islam entered the equation. Zia required a framework through which his discourse could unquestionably be essentialised and there was none better than the *raison d'être* of Pakistan itself. For Zia, the cleansing process had to begin in an area which Bhutto had dangerously neglected. The binaries for the establishment of this ideology changed subtly. National identity was mediated not against the 'morally bankrupt' West, but the Pakistani woman.

In her novel *An American Brat* (1993), Bapsi Sidhwa reflects on the zeitgeist of the Zia years in typically incisive yet emotive fashion. The impact of the Hudood ordinances on the gendered landscape of the Pakistani woman is expressed through an extended metaphor:

The new mischief in their midst had sneaked up on them unawares and surprised them one day when they read about the Famida and Allah Baksh case. The couple, who had eloped to get married, had been accused of committing adultery, or *zina*, by the girl's father. They were sentenced to death by stoning.

(Sidhwa 1993: 246)

Zia's refashioning of the state's role in the private and public spaces may well have been Machiavellian, with the newly configured nationalist ideology acting as the moral regulator of bodies and minds. But his 'mischief' also carried a painful sting, with the threat of violence often culminating in the *deus ex machina* which the new, male-centric national character of Pakistan dictated.²

It appears tempting, in light of the historical discourse concerning the period, to view the Zia era as a grim corollary of the country's dark past, in terms of the way the question of gender has been negotiated violently by its successive nationalisms. However, from the late '70s onwards, in the lead up to the General's *coup d'état* and his subsequent changes to the constitution within the *Chaar aur Char Diwari* framework of Islamisation, Pakistan certainly experienced its most substantial and significant period of feminist intervention and activism.³ These contributions played an equally pertinent role in shaping what was fast becoming a gendered nationalist consciousness. The violence that characterised the Zia years and the many victims it claimed

still reverberate powerfully when the past is revisited. But alongside this legacy of pain stands a compelling narrative of resistance, which tends to be sidelined if not subsumed by the totemic image of the Pakistani woman as historic victim ever since the country's fractious inception.

Postmodernity and the (trans)national Pakistani romance

Whilst the fiction of Shahraz makes subversive interventions from within the limits of the patriarchal discursive framework which underpins the romantic imaginary, her anglophone contemporaries have predictably realigned their focus. Both Shamsie and Abdullah concentrate on the politics and poetics of a postcoloniality which is expressed through the pleasures and pain of diasporic migration and displacement. Of course, the transnational turn is not unique in the tenuous canon of 'Pakistani' literature. What primarily interests me in this instance is the way these authors make their diasporic inscriptions within the conventions of a genre that can still be identified as belonging to the romance tradition. The Pakistani romantic imaginary therefore becomes an intertext which can be reconfigured and reshaped in a dissonant migratory space. The discourse of romance is destabilised and refashioned from within the limits of diasporic movement, a movement which shapes a potential feminist agency.

As a practitioner of this genre, Abdullah's most intriguing work is *Beyond the Cayenne Wall* (2005), which is a collection of short stories focusing around the twin spaces of the 'Home' and 'World'. 'Crimson Calling' is an example of one of these narratives, which employs the romance trope at the same time as it seeks to reimagine it through the postmodern identity politics of diaspora. The binaries are familiar here as the story concerns Minnah, a woman who has returned to the 'constricted' city of Karachi from 'the biggest University in Texas', where 'she felt she had it all' (2005: 32). The regenerative migratory spaces have been curtailed for Minnah, however, by the end of an affair which she was involved in with her University professor, who failed to disclose that he had a young family. It is in the return to Karachi that the trope of romance is most apparent. As she 'gazed into the eyes of her husband of only a few minutes and smiled' (2005: 43), the play of ambivalence underpins the ostensible mimesis of romance in the homeland. Minnah is either wholly invested in this or, perhaps more plausibly, she retains hope of reconfiguring the patriarchal landscape with the shifting, fluid transnational expression of identity that is the corollary of her migration to the 'World' of America. The real epistemological crisis lies at the border of these inscriptions, however, as Minnah explores the idea of revealing her affair to her new husband. This may be a manoeuvre that is full of wishful thinking, at best, emphasising a reductive outlook in which the conservative space of 'Home' is transformed and 'liberated' by the diasporic migrant returning. Moreover, Abdullah is perhaps also aware of the corporeal risk that such an intervention necessarily involves, again highlighting the spectre of violence and erasure.

The romance trope therefore appears at the site of a curious double bind in Abdullah's story, which telegraphs an alternative gendered historiography; a historiography underpinned by the enabling narrative of transnational movement. As Meenah returns home, her 'love' is both 'fluid-like and fragile' (2005: 43); her 'Ma had no idea how independent her little daughter had become' (2005: 42). She exhibits this confidence by taking a romance discourse at whose limits she had strained as a diasporic woman, and superimposing it textually onto its diametric opposite – the arranged marriage. It is an unsettling hybridity which raises questions about the many Pakistani women who cannot refashion patriarchy. In the end, the spectres of cultural memory threaten to destabilise Minnah's romantic imaginary.

There is therefore a caveat to such an attenuated postmodern postcoloniality and it is conspicuous in Shamsie's novel *Kartography* (2002). The main thematic and contextual dialogue

Shamsie employs to mediate both the romance narrative and the wider politics of her novel lies in the conflicting, oppositional views of the two lovers, Raheen and Karim, on maps and mapping, specifically the cartography of Karachi. Raheen's perspective is evident in the opening pages of the text:

The globe spins. Mountain ranges skim my fingers; there is static above the Arabian Sea. Pakistan is split in two, but undivided. This world is out of date. [...] I close my eyes, and wrap my fingers around a diamond-shaped bone. I still hear the world spinning. I spin with it, spin into a garden. At dusk. And yes, those are shoulder pads stitched into my shirt.

(Shamsie 2002: 1)

There is more at stake in this cartographical project than the metaphorical, in terms of the romance conventions that evidently underpin the text. The valorisation of Raheen's alternative, romanticised landscape is unsettling. It must be remembered that her fluid and flexible conception of Karachi's spatial markings, where movement is entirely predicated on the liberal scope of imagination and memory, also produces an essentialist map of its own. The very real violence and 'crisis' that shape the trauma etched in Karachi's cultural memory and landscape, are eschewed by Raheen's desire to map space in a certain way. These particular postcolonial sensibilities are rooted in a diasporic migration away from, and the subsequent return to, the postcolonial homeland. Raheen's and Karim's migratory experiences represent the seamless movement through transnational space of the diasporic subject who is clearly comfortable in their own globalised skin. The inscriptions which Shamsie's characters make eschew other dissenting identities from their ostensibly apolitical framework. And, significantly, it is only the diasporic *flâneur* – from a specific class and enlightened by their journey across specific transnational flows – who has the privilege to make such fluid markings on their refashioned map of Karachi.

'She has discovered a new lease of life': cultural memory, contingency, and the play of imagination in the romance of Qaisra Shahraz

The geopolitical position of Shahraz perhaps mirrors those contemporary postcolonial voices purporting to vocalise the concerns of the country from which they have been exiled, either by birth or circumstance. Yet her work does not possess a Rushdie-esque postmodern expression of postcoloniality, nor does it establish continuity with the diasporic traditions of her immediate contemporaries such as Shamsie or Abdullah. *The Holy Woman* undoubtedly makes references to, and effectively is, a romance novel in many of the ways Radaway identifies. The copies of the novel being circulated in Pakistan are not imported either, so that with an altogether different readership and a unique nationalist and historical backdrop against which feminist interventions have been played out, it appears significant to question whether a more nuanced approach to reading the Pakistani romance is required. In terms of locating Shahraz's work against Abudullah's and especially Shamsie's, the important question is how the liminal, female Pakistani voice is mapped and imagined. In this sense, Shahraz does not situate agency through performative politics that have been appropriated by diasporic postcoloniality. Her representation of performativity emerges from a mimesis of the romance genre that necessarily collapses under the weight of its contingencies, the most glaring of which is the erasure of the female body. Agency, therefore, is always fashioned with a recognition of absence, a recognition which the texts of the other authors and their migratory inscriptions do not accommodate.

What is immediately evident for readers of *The Holy Woman*, then, is the way the representation of a gendered, feminist agency is foregrounded. It is an agency forged from within the limits of its own tenuous literary conventions, which the evocation of romance struggles to transcend. These representational limits stem from the pressures of a nationalist history whose ideological presence proves at once unsettling and enabling. Shahraz's romance, far from performing a Radaway-style containment of agency, continuously stimulates its readers' interests by suggesting how the former could possibly be achieved without necessarily being subsumed by the very cultural and nationalist patriarchies it is challenging, a reality her audience would be all too familiar with. Agency exists as a dynamic question, constantly changing and always locked in conflict, rather than a static, stage-managed corollary both produced and appropriated by the ideological work of successive romance fictions.

Shahraz's novel in this sense is a veritable patchwork quilt of different social, cultural, and literary representational material. More than resonating on a textual level, to any reader familiar with the author's work in the genre of Pakistani television drama, or examples of these generally, *The Holy Woman* reads like a novelisation of such sprawling serials, epic family melodramas that are typically broadcast across six to eight months of screen time. The melodrama in Shahraz's epic has a decidedly visual quality, with other literary devices subordinated to reams of dialogue between protagonists or healthy doses of knowingly clichéd, free indirect discourse. So far, so romance novel-esque. Indeed, part of the front cover, beneath some orientalist artwork, consists of a quotation by newspaper critic Michele Roberts, enthusiastically proclaiming the novel to be 'a dramatic story of family intrigue, religious passions and riproaring romance'. And an initial overview of the narrative apparently reinforces such an appreciation, which speaks to the stock conventions that shape the genre as described by Radaway.

The eponymous holy woman is the heroine of the piece, Zarri Bano. She is the eldest daughter of Habib Khan, son of Siraj Din and overlord of his landed wealth, presided over by both men in the rural district of Sindh. Invoking Sindhi rural tradition, Habib weds Zarri Bano to the Qur'an, despite the vehement protestations of both daughter and wife. It is essentially a *sponsa Christi*, with a difference, being a complete anathema to the religion it is allegedly a ritual of. Habib's daughter is to be shrouded in a black veil at all times when she leaves her home, and in adopting the title of 'the holy woman' in the village, she renounces the possibility of marriage. Her new role entails devotion to the religion and its rigorous study. More significantly, however, in remaining a virgin and thus unmarried, she has also protected Habib's estate as the ritual also crucially necessitates that the inheritance in its entirety be passed onto her. The opening quotation in this chapter relates to this point in the narrative where the same forces that attempted to convince the novel's heroine of the worthiness of her new position now wish to extricate her from that very role. Amidst much reluctance and recrimination, Zarri Bano agrees to marry her former suitor Sikander on her conditions, which make abundantly clear that the reason for her surrender to the pressure imposed on her is the welfare of her nephew, Haris. The nuclear family is reformed then, but is also pervaded by an unease and anxiety, as the reader is left to imagine the consummation of a romance that may never occur.

Even in the somewhat compressed overview given, the stresses and strains within the narrative framework are apparent. And these are produced at the site where gendered agency is enunciated through the ideological work of a patriarchal literary discourse. Two conflicting, irreconcilable discursive frameworks are superimposed in *The Holy Woman*. The expression of feminist agency is qualified by an appreciation of the violent gaps and silences characterising the relationship Pakistani women have with their country's history. But, at the same time, such an enunciation from within the confines of time-honoured patriarchal conventions is confidently asserted against the backdrop of the significant feminist interventions made historically at a time

when state-driven, religiously defined nationalism was presenting another oppressive challenge to Pakistani women. Retrospectively or otherwise, the legacy of the Zia regime reverberates throughout Shahraz's novel, so that agency is the product of both the glaring contingencies that continue to mark its legacy and the tenuous possibilities the historical, feminist response to it may have provided for the expression of the former.

The marriage of Zarri Bano to the Qur'an is the stage where such a potentially enabling refashioning is enacted and also the symbolic site at which localised rural patriarchies both enunciate themselves and unravel. Once it becomes patently obvious that the heroine's sacrificial gesture signifies nothing beyond the preservation of land, the ritual struggles to reify itself ideologically. At this point, gendered identity across various spectrums, not just the religiously cultivated, becomes vulnerable to questioning, threatening to collapse under the weight of its own contingencies. Zarri Bano's ceremonial veiling therefore *unveils* the material conditions underpinning the interpellation of identity and subjectivity for women such as herself. This is apparent in her impassioned response as her father dictates her fate to her for the first time:

I want to be a normal woman, Father, and live a normal life! I want to get married. I am not a very religious person, as you know. I am a twentieth-century, modern, educated woman. I am not living in the Mughal period – a pawn in a game of male chess. Don't you see, Father, I have hardly ever prayed in my life nor opened the Holy Quran on a regular basis.

(Shahraz 2001: 90)

Yet even as she reasons forlornly, the implications of her words appear to unravel before her. Her father's actions have suddenly brought into sharp focus the whole concept of 'normality' as far as women and their socially constituted roles are concerned. A contradiction begins to emerge in what Zarri Bano is saying here. Being a 'normal woman' and leading 'a normal life', rather than offering a magical passport to enfranchisement, itself entails being 'a pawn in a male game of chess'. The central protagonist's 'twentieth-century, modern' education, far from safeguarding her entry into such a world, acts as a facilitator in a very ideologically specific construction of the 'normal woman'. She may be 'educated' and dress in a manner that is less conservative than her female peers in the village, but her identity, 'the essence of her womanhood', is still defined by her place in the patriarchal hierarchy which involves heterosexual love, marriage, and children (Shahraz 2001: 92). This is the type of 'normality' that a cherished union with Sikander would have provided her with. Very quickly, however, Zarri Bano becomes aware of the precarious foundations undergirding the 'choices' available to her:

The Holy Woman. The woman he [Habib] created by killing me. Did you not know that men are the true creators in our culture, Mother? They mould our lives and destinies according to their whims and desires. The irony of all ironies, for which I can never forgive myself, is that it has happened to me – a feminist, a defender of women's rights. I have been living in a glass house of make-believe.

(Shahraz 2001: 94)

Therefore, whether she opts for a ceremonial marriage to the Qur'an and a life shaped by apparent enclosure and devotion to her religion, or marriage to Sikander, the hero, and the promise of a 'freedom' that is very much ideologically circumscribed, Zarri Bano's agency, her identity, will always be the product of epistemic violence, conspicuous only by its absence on the margins of competing essentialisms.

In this rather bleak landscape, it is logical to question what is actually enabling about the veiled identity which the heroine of the novel assumes. It is important to tread carefully here as it would be inaccurate to suggest that Zarri Bano's shrouded appearance offers some kind of transformative potential. Yet if her imposed role is not a starting point for the conscious performance of various identities whose material parameters have now become transparent, there is little doubt that the holy woman of the title is the springboard for a visible (re)configuration. From behind her religious garb and the authority it gives her, Zarri Bano feels empowered enough to expose how the 'identity' of the Pakistani woman cannot transcend its own materiality. The role she occupies is a corporeal testament to this, where the previously mythical, essentialist significance of religion is reduced to the symbolic, unable to escape that for which it is a mere patina – which is ultimately the preservation of land and wealth through the enclosure of the female body. And it is with the body that Zarri Bano begins to explore the enabling possibilities of her position:

The cloak hid the shape of her body totally. 'I could be fifteen stones in weight and obese, but nobody would know the difference', Zarri Bano mused. In effect nobody would ever guess that apart from a silky slip and other pieces of lingerie, she wore nothing else.

(Shahraz 2001: 162)

Zarri Bano's newly veiled persona provides her with a position from which she can interrogate the way her body was figured and represented in her previous, 'liberated' existence. Far from rendering her invisible, the covered position becomes an enlightening one in that it illuminates, for her, how the 'norm' that she once craved was one in which her corporeal appearance was shaped by the politics of various benign patriarchies. The way her body was figured changed accordingly as she was exchanged between the spaces of these subtly distinct frameworks. 'Propriety' in this sense would necessitate that she appears differently in front of her father from the 'fashionable' sartorial elegance that her meetings with Sikander or a trip to the village fete would demand. But the end game remained the same, with the control of the female body by either the paternalistic or sexually charged patriarchal gaze marking the stable 'norm' of the 'ordinary woman' Zarri Bano assumed she always was (Shahraz 2001: 159). Her identity at this point becomes an entirely contingent, ideological construction.

It must be reiterated here that Shahraz's epic romance text is a simulacra of the discourses through which, in many ways, she nostalgically reimagines the Sindhi landscape of her past. Yet the type of destabilising feminist intervention that emerges in the shape of her holy woman does not become enclosed in its own hyperreality. The risk with this type of representational politics is that it threatens to become hegemonic in its own right, where any alternative discursive or political intervention is repudiated because a preoccupation with the material is not its defining principle. This is avoided in Shahraz's text, even though it appears in every way to be vulnerable to such criticism. The pleasures her novel speaks to, both in a contemporary sense and those it seeks to recapture from the past, are energised by very specific historical processes shaping the ongoing conflict between gender and nation in Pakistan. Zarri Bano's reclamation of her body within the ideological frameworks of the various local and national patriarchies that would seek to possess and enclose it, never becomes lost in its own representation or materiality. Instead, such a gendered politics of the body actually stems from an awareness of what is lost, what is perpetually on the margins. What is empowering, therefore, for the heroine of Shahraz's romance is not the forming of her own illusory opposition, in which she is either sustaining patriarchy, or marginalising other Pakistani women from different classes and ethnicities, but

instead always remaining in that space which is between even the in-between, revealing what is alienated and marginalised from behind the patina of ideological legitimacy.

At a time when Pakistan was seeing an unprecedented rise in feminist opposition to the institutionalised gendered violence of the Zia regime, the guerrilla resistance of a Zarri Bano would undoubtedly have resonated with Pakistani women across the spectrums of class and ethnicity. Localised patriarchal practices such as the wedding of the bride to the holy book were ones that Zia had ironically attempted to eradicate and bring under the banner of his own nationally marked, gendered ideology. He initially had to support powerful feudal regions such as the Sindh as a precursor to gaining political power, and this came with a tacit understanding that traditions such as those depicted in Shahraz's novel would inevitably continue (Mahmud 1995). Nostalgic romances such as *The Holy Woman* therefore suggest that whilst opposition to Zia's policies continued to be orchestrated on a national level, the most significant subversion was being expressed by women, across the discrete, localised spaces of Pakistan, and within the pleasures they derived from their reading practices.

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate the unique trajectory taken by the development of writing by Pakistani women in the form of the popular romance, especially during the period of General Zia's rule. The adoption of such a globalised generic form inevitably provokes the immediate queries of what exactly the romance – in terms of its enduring, conventional narrativity, ideological work, and textual pleasures – has to offer writing that is taking place in a radically different context. What I have concluded is that examples of the rise in romance literature during the period in question must be theorised against the historical context of contemporary Pakistan and, significantly, the legacy of the relationship which feminist interventions of the past have had with the country's previous nationalism and their discourses. The work of Riaz makes its own jarring and dissonant inscriptions against these discursive frameworks, displaying an acute awareness of how the Pakistani woman both appears and is erased in their political spaces. Her work is therefore a credible starting point when considering what is at stake in questions of gendered agency in the context of Pakistani romance literature. The dissonant questions raised by her material also emerge as traces in the work of the diasporic authors Shamsie and Abdullah. In refashioning the romance through a transnational lens, the margin appears to be under erasure rather than the site of agency. A novel like *The Holy Woman* thus cannot just be viewed as pastiche. The representational work of the romance in the Pakistani context is, therefore, transformed, especially where the female body is concerned. For so many years the site of literal and epistemic violence, the body in Shahraz's romance is ironically able to inscribe, and to enunciate after it is inscribed upon. The correlation between an activism acutely conscious of a history shaped by violence against the female body and a literary practice that cleverly crafts subversion and agency out of a hegemonic cultural form which seems unsustainable, appears, in my opinion, powerfully coincidental.

Notes

- 1 For a particularly enlightening study of the way popular culture is consumed and received, see Hanaway and Heston (2006).
- 2 I have been fortunate enough to be able to consult several works which provide perceptive analysis of the historical period relating to the military ideologue's dictatorship. I am indebted to Ian Talbot (2005) for the bulk of my information, particularly his excellent chapter on Zia's deployment of religious nationalism. Other historical studies include Lawrence Ziring (2003), Mohammad Waseem (1989), and Shahid Burki and Craig Baxter (1991). From a feminist perspective, especially the way the body intersects with religiously based ideas of nationhood, Sadia Toor (2007), Rubina Saigol (1995), and Sadia Toor and Neelam Hussain (1997) are seminal texts.

- 3 By far the most infamous measure of Zia's nationalist project in this respect was his implementation of the Hudood or Zina ordinances circa 1983, following on from a rigorous campaign to infuse the ideological consciousness of the public with *Chaadar aur Char Diwari*, which literally translates as 'the veil and the four walls', and puts an emphasis on erasure and enclosure. The body, first and foremost, is to be regulated, with the *Chaadar*, derived from an Islamic directive as a head covering, to be mandatory as a form of dress for all women. This message was disseminated and reinforced through a coordinated media campaign.

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