

## In The Shadows of Piety: Women and Religious Authority through Nawal El Saadawi's *'The Fall Of the Imam'* and Tehmina Durrani's *'Blasphemy'*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on two key religious figures: Imam (In Arabic, a leader) and Pir (a Mystic spiritual guide) as presented in the fictional narratives by Nawal El Saadawi and Tehmina Durrani. Imbued with unwavering devotion to traditional principles, Imams and Pirs play pivotal roles in shaping Islamic society. Scholars from diverse disciplines are currently scrutinising their roles in the contemporary context. This study examines the lives of prominent religious figures, exposing the dual nature of their existence, an outward image of enlightenment contrasted with private tendencies towards authoritarianism and envy through the analytical lens of Islamic feminist literary criticism. Saadawi and Tehmina fearlessly confront the inherent bias entrenched in the social, cultural, and legal system and expose the manipulation of religion to privilege men, vividly depicting women as the victims in a society steeped in male-dominated religious fervour. This study employs Islamic feminist literary criticism to examine how patriarchal ideologies are reinforced through selective interpretations of sacred texts from the Quran and Hadith. Its primary objective is to investigate the mechanisms by which male religious authorities maintain gendered hierarchies and perpetuate violence against women. Both novels under study illustrate male figures punishing women for transgressions in which the men themselves are complicit, exposing the hypocrisy and human cost of patriarchal power. The analysis addresses sensitive issues such as domestic abuse justified through scripture, the authority of Imams, the practice of stoning, and the cultural influence of Pirs, revealing the real-life consequences of these power dynamics. Findings underscore the persistence of entrenched patriarchal structures within Islamic discourse and highlight the urgent need to challenge and reinterpret these frameworks to foster more inclusive and just understandings of Islam.*

*Keywords: Politics; Muslim; Women; religion; Marriages; Quran; Culture*

### INTRODUCTION

*The sensual eye is just like the palm of the hand. The palm does not have the means of covering the whole of the beast.*

(Rumi)

Islamic communities articulate order and justice through religious knowledge, emphasising the establishment of moral sovereignty through Islamic laws (Shah, 1991). Religious authorities, predominantly men, assume the role of disseminating knowledge from the Quran and Hadith, with the 'Imam' being a key figure associated with mosques, offering religious instruction. This study focuses on two such authorities: one is the Imam, a representative religious authority in Islam, and the other is the Pir. The study aims to examine how such figures sustain patriarchal hierarchies and control over women through the selective interpretation of sacred texts. Imams, beyond spiritual leadership, are expected to counsel, mediate disputes, and contribute to conflict resolution,

requiring a diverse skill set (Al-Krenawi, 2016, p. 363). The 'Pir,' associated with Sufi culture, similarly serves the community in a spiritual role (Liu, 2011, p. 11). To explore the literary representation of these dynamics, two novels are selected. Employing Islamic feminist literary criticism as the theoretical lens, the study contributes to literary scholarship by bridging textual analysis with socio-religious critique, demonstrating how literature can reveal, critique, and challenge entrenched patriarchal structures within Islamic discourse.

In Muslim societies, Imams and Pirs are entrusted with societal duties, addressing issues across various domains. The roles of these religious figures are examined in disciplines like social work, psychology, literature, political science, economics, and law. Islamic ethics, rooted in the sociological nature of things, govern social interactions and conflicts (Liu, 2011). Through the application of Islamic feminism, this study highlights the experiences of women and looks at how Islamic teachings have traditionally been applied by male religious leaders in ways that restrict women's empowerment, exposing gaps in the realisation of gender parity. According to what was said, despite the primary dissemination of teachings by male religious leaders, the consistent elevation of women's status remains a challenge, with women intellectuals contesting gender-related issues (Madigan, 2009). Feminist perspectives highlight that verbatim religious knowledge alone cannot advance women's status, as seen in the resistance of Muslim women to conservative gender rules imposed by Islamist groups (Hatem, 2002). This paper argues that Saadawi and Durrani, through their literary portrayals of Imams and Pirs, expose the manipulation of religious authority to sustain patriarchal power, while simultaneously foregrounding women's resistance as a critique of these inequities. By analysing these narratives, the study underscores the urgent need to reinterpret Islamic discourse in ways that restore women's agency, challenging entrenched patriarchal frameworks and advancing a more inclusive understanding of faith and justice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Islamic feminism in Arab and South Asian postmodern fiction remains limited, despite the rich potential of literature to interrogate gender, religion, and power. Both Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* (2012) and Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* (1999) exemplify the use of fiction as a medium to critique patriarchal religious authority and illuminate women's resistance within oppressive systems.

In *The Fall of the Imam*, Saadawi presents a layered critique of male religious leadership in Egypt, highlighting the ways in which patriarchal authority manipulates religion to consolidate social and political control (Roziki et al., 2023; Saadawi, 2012). The Imam, as both a religious and a political figure, enforces obedience through fear rather than moral or spiritual guidance, reflecting Foucault's notion of power as both productive and repressive (Bevir, 1999). The Imam's performative religiosity conceals his personal ambition, greed, and authoritarian tendencies, a distinction echoed in analyses of patriarchal appropriation of religion (Al-Hady, 2024; Paludi & Ellens, 2016). The institutional reinforcement of his authority, where councils proclaim him "the best and holiest of men" (Saadawi, 2012, p. 48), illustrates how societal structures perpetuate gendered hierarchies and silence women's voices (Al-Hady, 2024; Roziki et al., 2023).

A central intervention of Saadawi's work is the narrative voice of Bint Allah, the Imam's illegitimate daughter, whose fragmented narration challenges patriarchal authority and questions the ethical and religious legitimacy of male-dominated power. Her insistence on accountability, "Why do you always let the criminal go free and punish the victim?" (Saadawi, 2012, p. 91),

demonstrates a reclaiming of interpretive authority, aligning with Badran's (2009) argument that Islamic feminist discourse seeks to reinterpret religion from women's perspectives. Saadawi's portrayal of women's oppression, including denial of literacy, confinement, and social marginalisation, underscores the cultural rather than theological origins of patriarchal control (Paludi & Ellens, 2016; Roziki et al., 2023). By juxtaposing the Imam's authority with Bint Allah's resilient voice, Saadawi foregrounds the potential for subversion and resistance even within highly restrictive systems (Moghissi, 1999).

Saadawi's exploration of zina and the selective application of Sharia law further exposes the manipulation of religious directives to maintain male dominance. While the Qur'an prescribes equal punishment for men and women in cases of adultery (Khanam, 2016, 24:2), the novel depicts women being punished disproportionately, highlighting the gap between religious ideals and cultural practice (Mir-Hosseini & Hamzić, 2010; Zakiuddin, 2015). Such portrayals resonate with broader critiques of patriarchal interpretations that distort the egalitarian essence of Islam (Al-Hady, 2024; Barlas, 2002).

Similarly, Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* portrays patriarchal religious authority in the Pakistani context, exposing how figures like Pir Sain exploit spiritual devotion for personal gain (Ali, 2023; Durrani, 1999). The novel documents the systemic oppression of women within the zenana, revealing practices such as marital rape, sexual abuse, and extreme control over daily life (Adhikary, 2014; Shahid et al., 2022). By highlighting Pir Sain's hypocrisy, preaching morality while enacting violence and sexual exploitation, Durrani critiques the social mechanisms through which religious authority becomes a tool for patriarchal domination (Ansari, 2010; Riaz, 2020).

Heer's narrative, as first-person testimony, underscores the intersections of poverty, superstition, and religious hierarchy, demonstrating how social and economic vulnerabilities reinforce women's subjugation (Ali, 2023; M. Khan, 1995). Despite enduring extreme coercion, Heer engages in covert resistance, such as guiding her son away from his father's corrupt path, exemplifying women's agency and the potential to challenge oppressive systems (Adhikary, 2014; The Guardian, 2025). Durrani's novel thereby aligns with Islamic feminist critiques that argue oppression is rooted in human interpretations of religion rather than divinely ordained structures (Hidayatullah, 2014; Lestari, 2024).

Jelodar et al., (2013) study on veiling in *Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis* provides a comparative lens, illustrating how visual and literary narratives can interrogate the cultural and religious construction of female bodies. Like Saadawi and Durrani, the work challenges essentialist representations of Muslim women, revealing the complex negotiations of agency, identity, and resistance within constraining social frameworks. This highlights that Islamic feminist literary analysis benefits from cross-cultural comparisons, connecting South Asian and Middle Eastern contexts with broader discourses on gender, religion, and authority.

Both novels reveal how patriarchal authority intersects with religion, politics, and culture to systematically marginalise women. Saadawi's and Durrani's works highlight the material, social, and psychological costs of such domination, while simultaneously offering narratives of resilience and resistance (Bukhari, 2025; Saadawi, 2008; Zia, 2009). By centring women's experiences and interpretive voices, these texts contribute to the broader project of Islamic feminism: reclaiming egalitarian principles, contesting distorted religious narratives, and advocating for social reform grounded in justice and moral integrity (Al-Hady, 2024; Rashid, 2025; Sirri, 2020).

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that the oppression depicted in *The Fall of the Imam* and *Blasphemy* is structural, deriving from patriarchal social norms and institutional complicity rather than theological mandates. These novels not only critique male misuse of

religious authority but also foreground women's agency, resistance, and capacity to reimagine religious and social norms. Future research could expand comparative studies across Islamic societies to investigate the ongoing tensions between tradition, modernity, and social reform, further highlighting the critical role of literature in promoting gender justice (Liu, 2011; Madigan, 2009; Newby, 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative analytical framework rooted in Islamic feminist theory and postcolonial literary criticism to examine how gender, religion, and power intersect within Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* (2012) and Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* (1999). The framework builds upon the works of Muslim feminist scholars such as Asma Barlas (2002), Leila Ahmed (1982), and Zia (2018), who collectively highlight that the subordination of women in Muslim societies is not divinely ordained but rather a result of patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings. By integrating these perspectives, the study analyses how literature operates as a site of resistance against religious and social domination while reaffirming the egalitarian ethos embedded in Islam.

The evolution of Islamic feminism in Egypt provides the historical foundation for this analysis. As Ahmed (1982) notes, early Egyptian feminism emerged in dialogue with nationalist movements, challenging both colonial Orientalism and indigenous patriarchy. The 1919 nationalist revolution marked a significant shift, as women like Huda Sha'rawi and Malak Hifni Nasif contested the "urban harem" culture and redefined women's public roles. Reformist thinkers such as Muhammad Abdu advanced the idea of social change within Islamic frameworks, particularly regarding marriage and education, though women continued to face discrimination in family law (Shukrallah, 1994). Later, as Islamist movements gained prominence in the 1980s, Islamic feminism re-emerged as a counter-discourse that reclaimed religious interpretation as a feminist act, situating faith as a site of liberation rather than constraint (Sirri, 2020).

A parallel trajectory unfolded in Pakistan, where the establishment of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in 1981 marked a defining moment in Muslim women's collective activism. WAF's mobilisation against General Zia-ul-Haq's Hudood Ordinances exemplified the strategic use of Islamic egalitarian principles to resist patriarchal state control (Zia, 2009). As recorded by Nighat Said Khan and Ayesha Khan (Sadaf, 2019), these efforts foregrounded the possibility of feminist resistance within religious frameworks. Zia (2018) further critiques global feminist paradigms that overlook the complexities of Muslim women's agency, emphasising how figures like Asma Barlas and Riffat Hassan reassert the Qur'anic ethos of justice and dignity for both sexes. This dual struggle against both Western essentialism and internal patriarchy defines Islamic feminism as simultaneously decolonial and reformist.

Within this historical and theoretical backdrop, literature emerges as a critical lens for examining the negotiation of gender and faith. Both Saadawi and Durrani employ fiction as a means to expose the manipulation of religion by patriarchal institutions. Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* articulates a scathing critique of male religious authority through the figure of the Imam, whose piety masks political ambition and moral corruption. The novel dramatises the psychological and spiritual conflict between divine justice and human tyranny, exposing how religion is weaponised to maintain class and gender hierarchies (Roziki et al., 2023; Saadawi, 2012). Durrani's *Blasphemy* parallels this dynamic within Pakistan's feudal-religious landscape,

where Pir Sain's misuse of spiritual authority exemplifies how faith becomes an instrument of domination (Ali, 2023; Durrani, 1999).

The role of the Imam and the Pir in these texts mirrors real-world structures of religious hierarchy. Asma Barlas (2002) argues that patriarchal religious authority is sustained by historically selective readings of scripture, which elevate male interpretive privilege while silencing women's voices. Al-Krenawi (2016) similarly observes that the mosque operates as both a spiritual and political institution, reinforcing gendered power through male-exclusive leadership. Zakiuddin (2015) identifies this as "male privilege in imamhood," a structural feature that perpetuates gendered exclusion in both religious and developmental discourse. Saadawi and Durrani engage with these realities by portraying women who, despite oppression, reclaim interpretive and moral agency. Bint Allah's defiant questioning of divine justice in Saadawi's novel, and Heer's moral awakening in Durrani's narrative, both signify a symbolic rewriting of religious authority.

This research adopts a thematic and contextual analytical approach to examine Islamic feminist critique in *The Fall of the Imam* and *Blasphemy*. Close reading of the texts focuses on narrative voice, symbolism, and character development, highlighting patriarchal violence, manipulation of religious doctrine, marital abuse, and moral hypocrisy. Bint Allah's fragmented narration and Heer's experiences reveal mechanisms of male domination alongside subtle forms of women's resistance, such as endurance, observation, and counter-narratives.

The novels are further analysed within the socio-political and religious contexts of Egypt and Pakistan, exploring how male religious leaders consolidate authority through political alliances, cultural distortions of Islam, and selective enforcement of Sharia. The study examines the gap between egalitarian Islamic principles and patriarchal practices, including ritualised hierarchies, marital subjugation, and social marginalisation of women.

This integrated approach demonstrates how literature functions as both a reflection of systemic oppression and a site of resistance, reclaiming women's interpretive authority and promoting alternative visions of justice, agency, and equality.

#### ANALYSIS THE ENIGMATIC MASQUERADE OF THE IMAM IN 'THE FALL OF THE IMAM'

Scholarly research relating Islamic feminism to Arab postmodern fiction is scarce. *The Fall of the Imam* highlights the contradictions between Islamic law and patriarchal practice and serves as an example of male dominance in Egyptian politics and religion. *The Fall of the Imam* (Saadawi, 2012) is chosen because it examines male religious leadership in Egypt, where the Imam controls women and society by influencing both religious and governmental institutions. Written by Nawal El Saadawi in 1987, translated from Arabic (*Soqout-Al-Imam*) to English (*The Fall of the Imam*) by her husband, Sherif Hatata, in 1988, this postmodern metafiction novel explores the oppressive authority of an Imam who fathers an illegitimate daughter known as Binte Allah (Daughter of Allah) or Daughter of Sin. The narrative, often disjointed and metaphorical, is recounted by Binte Allah, though events are not presented chronologically, resulting in erratic scenes and a lack of narrative consistency.

The novel offers a powerful critique of how religious authority, when appropriated by patriarchal figures, becomes a tool for domination rather than justice. At the centre of this critique is the Imam, whose authority depends less on spiritual guidance and more on the manipulation of



fear. His assertion that "without fear, no ruler, no Imam, can remain on the throne" (Saadawi, 2012) underscores the calculated construction of obedience. This strategy resonates with Foucault's insights into power, where discipline and control are internalised by communities, making submission appear natural (Bevir, 1999, p. 67). The Imam's religiosity is thus revealed as performative—his outward humility masking an inner reliance on deceit and authoritarianism.

Yet, Saadawi is not simply critiquing an individual male leader; she is drawing attention to the broader structures that sustain his authority. The community council, declaring "this is the absolute right of the Imam, for he is the best and holiest of men" (Saadawi, 2012), exemplifies how institutionalised religion can be mobilised to affirm male entitlement. As Al-Hady (2024) argues, patriarchal interpretations of Islam persist because they are reinforced by institutions that elevate men as sole interpreters of divine will, thereby silencing women's voices. In this way, the Imam functions as a symbol of what happens when religion is stripped of its egalitarian essence and reshaped to uphold male dominance.

However, to analyse the novel into a list of male bad behaviour would be to overlook its most important intervention. Saadawi gives voice to Bint Allah, the illegitimate daughter of the Imam, whose fragmented narrative both questions and resists patriarchal power. Her persistent questioning, "Why do you always let the criminal go free and punish the victim?" (Saadawi, 2012), functions as a direct indictment of the justice system and its gendered bias. While her voice is fractured and often silenced, the very act of speaking destabilises the monolithic authority of the Imam. This resonates with Badran's (2018) observation that Islamic feminist texts reclaim interpretive authority by rewriting history from women's perspectives, thereby challenging dominant patriarchal readings of Islam.

The Imam's treatment of women reveals the cultural, rather than theological, roots of his power. He reduces his wife to "flesh" without intellect, conceals her behind a veil, and denies her literacy (Saadawi, 2012). Later, upon attaining prosperity, he abandons her, deeming her unfit for his elevated status. Such depictions are consistent with what Paludi and Ellens (2016) describe as the "patriarchal appropriation of religion," where women's marginalisation is justified through cultural practices misrepresented as religious mandates. Roziki et al. (2023) also clarify this by defining specific types of distorted rights in the novel, such as the exclusion of women's membership in governmental organisations, education, work, and marital life. These distortions represent a systematic attempt to perpetuate male domination in the name of religious and cultural practices. Saadawi's critique here is twofold: she exposes the Imam's hypocrisy and underscores the gap between authentic Islamic values based on justice and equality and the distortions of those values by male leaders seeking to preserve their dominance.

Crucially, Saadawi also emphasises women's resistance, even if it appears symbolic or subdued. Bint Allah's voice resists erasure, functioning as a counter-narrative that unsettles patriarchal authority. Her fragmented narration itself becomes an act of defiance against the totalising discourse of the Imam and his council. This literary strategy reflects what Moghissi (2020) identifies as the feminist subversion of hegemonic narratives, where even partial or broken testimonies destabilise systems that depend on women's silence. Thus, women in *The Fall of the Imam* are not merely victims; they embody resilience and the possibility of reinterpretation, offering glimpses of a different, more just order.

At the same time, alternate readings could suggest that Saadawi's depiction risks portraying patriarchy as monolithic, with limited space for nuanced male characters. Some critics argue that this creates a stark binary between corrupt male leaders and oppressed women, without fully exploring male vulnerability or potential for reform. Yet, Saadawi's aim is less about producing

balanced character portrayals and more about allegorically exposing systemic injustice. By making the Imam excessively sanctimonious and hypocritical, she ensures that readers cannot mistake cultural patriarchy for divine will. This interpretive choice reflects what Al-Hady (2024) emphasises in her analysis of Islamic feminism: the urgent need to disentangle faith from patriarchal control and to expose religious distortion as a political tool rather than a spiritual truth.

*The Fall of the Imam* is not only a critique of a corrupt religious leader but also a layered allegory of patriarchal complicity, cultural distortion of religion, and the persistence of women's resistance. Saadawi juxtaposes the Imam's fraudulent sanctity with Bint Allah's fractured but enduring voice, thereby revealing the cracks within systems of domination. The novel anticipates contemporary Islamic feminist concerns: as Al-Hady (2024) reminds us, feminist readings of Islam today are "more relevant than ever" because they reclaim the egalitarian essence of the faith from the distortions of patriarchy. By foregrounding female agency within oppressive structures, Saadawi situates her work not merely as a critique, but as part of a broader struggle for interpretive justice—one that continues to resonate powerfully in contemporary debates about religion, gender, and authority.

Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* stands as one of the most striking examples of how Arab postmodern fiction can function as feminist resistance, dismantling patriarchal religious authority through allegory, metafiction, and fragmented narration. At its heart, the novel interrogates how religion is manipulated by male leaders to reinforce their dominance, a theme that resonates strongly with Islamic feminist critiques of patriarchal interpretation. The Imam, as both a religious and a political figure, embodies this distortion. His declaration "without fear, no ruler, no Imam, can remain on the throne" (Saadawi, 2012) encapsulates his governing philosophy: power is maintained not through justice but through fear and subjugation. This reveals the Imam's religiosity as performative, a mask behind which lies an insatiable hunger for wealth, status, and absolute control. Foucault's concept of power as productive yet repressive is useful here; the Imam's manipulation of fear is not accidental but a strategic mechanism of governance that ensures obedience (Bevir, 1999, p. 67).

What Saadawi emphasises, however, is that such power does not emerge in isolation. It is reinforced by the institutions, councils, and social systems that elevate the Imam as divinely sanctioned. When the council proclaims "this is the absolute right of the Imam, for he is the best and holiest of men" (Saadawi, 2012), it demonstrates how male-dominated institutions collude to naturalise his authority. Al-Hady (2024) highlights that patriarchal interpretations of Islam persist precisely because of such institutional complicity: women's voices are marginalised while men monopolise religious interpretation, thereby ensuring male supremacy is reproduced across generations. Saadawi thus critiques not only an individual Imam but the entire apparatus of cultural patriarchy masquerading as divine law.

This is further revealed in the novel's treatment of *zina* (illicit relations), which directly corresponds to one of the mechanisms through which patriarchal control is maintained: the selective justification of stoning. The author berates Arabic society for its hypocrisy in upholding Islamic law selectively, especially concerning gendered transgressions. According to her, society has failed to adhere to the true meaning of divine directives. The practice of stoning, or *rajm*, exemplifies this distortion. The Qur'an explicitly prescribes equal punishment for both men and women found guilty of adultery: "Flog the adulteress and the adulterer, each one of them, with a hundred lashes. Let no pity for them cause you to disobey God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let their punishment be witnessed by a number of believers" (Khan, 24:2). The verse emphasises two central principles: equality of punishment and the necessity of credible, believing

witnesses to verify the act.

However, *The Fall of the Imam* depicts a complete subversion of this egalitarian directive. The woman accused of fornication is stoned to death, while her male partner, the Imam himself, is exalted as the community's leader. This unjust act underscores how patriarchal societies manipulate divine law to preserve male privilege. Saadawi vividly portrays this distortion: "They tied her up with hemp cord and gathered in a circle around her, vying with one another to see who could throw more stones..." (Saadawi, 2012). Such imagery exposes the grotesque inversion of justice, where violence becomes a public spectacle celebrated as piety. Crucially, no legitimate witnesses were present; only the dog, Marzouk, saw the Imam's act, revealing the complete disregard for Qur'anic evidentiary standards.

Ziba Hossain & Hamzić (2010) observes that classical jurists originally aimed to protect personal honour and social morality in rulings on *zina*, not to institutionalise gender oppression. These rulings were gender-neutral in theory, demanding strict proof to prevent false accusations, making conviction almost impossible. Saadawi's portrayal exposes how such moral principles are corrupted when patriarchal regimes formalise divine laws into instruments of fear and control. By revealing how the Imam's authority depends on distorting religious directives, Saadawi demonstrates that the justification of *rajm* and the selective reading of scripture function as key mechanisms sustaining patriarchal dominance.

Importantly, *The Fall of the Imam* resists being read solely as a text about women's victimisation. Through Bint Allah's fragmented narration, Saadawi inserts an alternative interpretive voice. Her demand "Why do you always let the criminal go free and punish the victim?" (Saadawi, 2012) is not only a personal plea but a political question, one that exposes the injustice embedded in patriarchal law. Though often silenced, her voice punctures the seemingly totalising authority of the Imam. Badran (2018) notes that Islamic feminist discourse functions by reclaiming interpretive space, challenging the monopoly of male readings. Bint Allah's testimony, fragmented though it may be, participates in this reclamation: it is a counter-narrative that contests both the Imam's authority and the social structures that support him.

The Imam's treatment of his wife further underscores the cultural rather than theological basis of his authority. He reduces her to "flesh" without intellect, forbids her literacy, and later abandons her once he achieves prosperity (Saadawi, 2012). This reflects a recurring theme in Saadawi's work that Arab patriarchy conceals the egalitarian nature of Islam by fabricating a false religion that denies women the capacity to understand God's word. Such practices are not unique inventions of the Imam but echo broader societal norms where women are systematically excluded from education, literacy, and religious knowledge. By showing how the Imam uses religion to discard his wife, Saadawi demonstrates how men translate personal desires into religious justification, a critique echoed by Moghissi (2020), who argues that patriarchal dominance is sustained by conflating cultural control with divine sanction.

Saadawi also situates her critique within a broader political allegory. The Imam's manipulation of political parties Hizb Allah (Party of God) and Hizb Shaitan (Party of Satan) illustrates how religion and politics are intertwined to secure male dominance. His declaration, "if Satan does not come and go freely among my people, how are they going to know fear?" (Saadawi, 2012), reveals his reliance on constructing enemies and manufacturing fear to retain power. This corresponds with Zaman's analysis of *Ulema* in contemporary Islam, where religious leaders often pursue political power at the expense of spiritual responsibility (Zaman, 2010). In Saadawi's novel, the Imam's religiosity is a façade that cloaks his political opportunism, highlighting how patriarchal leadership often conflates divine authority with political ambition.



Still, Saadawi balances this depiction of male corruption with subtle but important portrayals of women's resistance. Bint Allah's fragmented narrative is one example, but there are also symbolic gestures of defiance embedded in women's silence, endurance, and observation. Their ability to witness and remember becomes a form of power, undermining the Imam's claim to absolute control. Moghissi (2020) reminds us that resistance does not always take the form of overt rebellion; it can manifest in testimony, storytelling, and symbolic defiance. Saadawi's novel exemplifies this by juxtaposing the Imam's totalising discourse with women's fractured but enduring voices.

One potential critique of Saadawi's narrative is that it risks portraying patriarchy as monolithic, reducing male characters to oppressors and female characters to victims or witnesses. This binary might overlook male vulnerability or the possibility of alternative masculinities. Yet, Saadawi's project is not realist but allegorical. By exaggerating the Imam's hypocrisy and cruelty, she ensures that readers cannot mistake cultural patriarchy for divine will. Her intention, as Al-Hady (2024) notes in her work on feminist reinterpretations of Islam, is to disentangle faith from patriarchal control and to expose the political misuse of religion as a distortion of its spiritual essence. In this sense, Saadawi's stark binaries are deliberate rhetorical strategies aimed at clarifying, rather than complicating, the injustice of patriarchal systems.

Ultimately, *The Fall of the Imam* functions as both critique and resistance. It critiques the corruption of religious authority, the collusion of political and religious institutions, and the cultural misrepresentation of Islam used to suppress women. At the same time, it foregrounds resistance through the voice of Bint Allah, whose testimony unsettles the Imam's authority and opens interpretive space for women's perspectives. By aligning the Imam's performative religiosity with political manipulation and juxtaposing it against women's silent endurance and fractured narration, Saadawi demonstrates that power is never absolute when scrutinised from the margins. This aligns with contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship, which insists on re-reading religious texts and practices critically to recover their egalitarian essence (Badran, 2018; Al-Hady, 2024).

Thus, Saadawi's novel is more than a condemnation of patriarchal misuse of religion; it is a literary enactment of feminist hermeneutics. It reclaims interpretive authority, amplifies women's voices, and insists that religion, stripped of its patriarchal distortions, can be reimagined as a source of justice and equality. In doing so, *The Fall of the Imam* contributes to the ongoing debates within Islamic feminism about the necessity of separating divine faith from cultural patriarchy, a struggle that remains as urgent today as when the novel was first published.

### BLASPHEMY: THE DUPING PIR SAIN

Women writers use novels to convey their social experiences, particularly highlighting the challenges faced by marginalised women in Pakistani society. Despite being constructed around patriarchal norms that justify male violence as a symbol of manliness, women persist in their struggle for survival.

The novel 'Blasphemy' (1998) adopts a first-person narrative to explore the life of a religious saint, Pir Sain, focusing on the secluded world of his household (Zenana) where women endure isolation, sexual abuse, and religious hypocrisy. The narrative unveils the concealed evils masked by religious attire. Examining the role of religious leaders in Pakistani politics, a distinction is drawn between Ulama (scholars) and Sufi saints. Sara Ansari underscores that Ulama, appointed as guardians of sharia law, became dependent on state stipends, while Sufi saints

traditionally emphasised spiritual growth and tended to isolate themselves from state power. However, the political landscape shifted with the rise of military rule under Zia-ul-Haq, leading to an alliance between religious leaders and the government (Ansari, 2010).

The impact of Sufism in rural Pakistan is noted, with Sufi saints continuing to influence despite conservative religious leaders condemning their practices. Sufism, considered an alternative nexus to Islamic authority, operates through a master-disciple relationship. This relationship is criticised by conservative Islamists, who label Sufis as idolatrous. Despite regulation, Sufism in Pakistan requires blind adherence from disciples to their pir. Recent research confirms that the political influence of Pirs remains significant, often reinforcing patriarchal norms while shaping societal hierarchies (Ali, 2023).

The novel comprises thirteen chapters, excluding the epilogue, a recurring feature in Tehmina's works to address readers' curiosity. It employs a first-person narrative, offering a firsthand experience of the protagonist, Heer's life. Heer narrates from a claustrophobic perspective, interspersed with accounts of domestic abuse within the zenana. The plot revolves around death, destruction, and Pir Sain's powerful influence over a village, starting with the Pir's demise and concluding with Heer's staged death. The characters are identified by nicknames, hinting at their regional origins.

The narrative delves into the significance of social status in Muslim society, emphasising family connections over individual compatibility. Heer's mother, influenced by Pir Sain's glamour, overlooks the significant age gap between Heer and her groom. The novel exposes the societal pressure on poor families to marry into affluent ones to escape an inferiority complex. Poverty becomes a decisive factor in Heer's fate as she sacrifices her life for her family's perceived betterment, a harsh reality reflecting the struggles of rural Pakistani women. The expectation of a positive change through Heer's marriage is shattered on her first wedding night, turning her dreams into a nightmarish trap, akin to a sacrificial goat in a ritualistic ceremony.

Marital rape is pervasive in South Asian society, often dismissed as a private matter. Heer's experience mirrors the prevalent issue in orthodox families, especially in rural Pakistan. Recent studies highlight that systemic gender discrimination, particularly in rural areas, continues to endanger women's safety and autonomy (Shahid et al., 2022). Heer's ordeal is likened to a graveyard, emphasising the trauma she endures. Drawing parallels with the case of Zainab Noor in 1994, Heer's narrative sheds light on the sexual abuse faced by women. Pir Sain, as the male breadwinner, exploits his privilege, adhering to societal codes that allow him to exert control over his wife. This mirrors Kate Millet's assertion in *'Sexual Politics'* that women are oppressed through a system using sex for domination. In patriarchal Muslim societies, women lack independent status and remain subservient to male family members. Heer's realisation reflects a universal issue where a woman's position depends on men, transitioning from father to husband to son. The haveli imposes severe restrictions, with Heer unable to send messages without her husband's permission.

The novel exposes how religious authority, like Pir Sain, manipulates religion to fulfil personal sexual desires while preaching moral values. He hypocritically condemns abortion as a sin but instructs Heer to abort her pregnancy, revealing the disconnect between his words and actions. Heer's insight portrays Pir Sain as a hypocritical figure exploiting religion to justify his perverse actions. Marital abuse is pervasive, exemplified by Heer's public beating for alleged disobedience to Allah regarding purdah. The constant companion for these women is silence, as survival means avoiding the master's wrath. The shared adversity among women associated with Pir doesn't foster companionship; instead, they spy on each other for the master's favour.

Heer's daily life is marred by potential violence over trivial matters in Pir Sain's regime. Even minor mistakes, like spilling milk or overcooked vegetables, result in unpardonable offences. Pir Sain's actions, far from mercy, lack benevolence, while his mother justifies them as corrective measures, revealing her marginalised status.

In *Blasphemy*, Durrani foregrounds purdah as a mechanism through which patriarchal authority is maintained, echoing Zeiny Jelodar et al. (2013), who describe veiling as both a tool of social control and a marker of female identity. The compulsory veiling and unveiling, as highlighted by Zeiny Jelodar et al., illustrates how women's bodies were politicised to serve state ideologies, creating divisions and constraining autonomy. Similarly, Durrani's female characters experience purdah not merely as a religious or cultural practice but as an instrument that limits their public presence and social mobility, enforcing moral and behavioural codes dictated by men.

Islamic justification for male dominance does not enable husbands to beat wives, a reality Heer recalls from her mother's experiences. Women are socialised into inferiority, and wives often excuse their husbands' beatings due to various reasons. Figures like Pir are often worshipped by poor and uneducated people. Heer highlights how people worship Pir Sain, considering him a link to the Almighty who can alter their fates. Poverty makes individuals vulnerable to superstitions prevalent in rural Pakistani Muslim society. The shrine holds immense power, with people seeking solutions to various issues like enmity, health, employment, and marriage. Poverty leads people to seek magical solutions from religious figures like pirs, seen as possessing supernatural powers. (Ali, 2023)

Pir Sain's status and power stem not from personal piety but from being the keeper of the shrine, believed to be the descendant of Prophet Muhammad. His exalted position arises from his lineage and role as a direct descendant, rather than personal religious devotion. Fatima Riaz argues that despite being labelled blasphemous and idolatrous by Muslim clergy, Sufi pirs have played a crucial role in maintaining political power over rural populations in Pakistan. The system has evaded government intervention due to its strong hold on popular imaginations. Not limited to the poor and illiterate, influential and wealthy individuals sought the pir's favour, pressing his legs in reverence and seeking prayers for success in various endeavours. Even aspiring politicians visited the shrine to gain mass support, as pirs hold sway over numerous followers nationwide, potentially becoming significant vote banks. (Riaz, 2020) Heer observes the power hierarchy and hypocrisy within the religious system, noting how wealth is claimed in the name of Allah, benefiting the shrine and its gaddi nashin. The dual character of Pir Sain raises doubts in Heer's mind about his supernatural power, questioning whether it is genuine or merely bestowed by ignorant followers.

In the novel, Pir Sain's family is notorious for incestuous affairs. Pir Sain himself tries to sexually assault his own daughter. Heer tries to keep her daughter safe from her father and arranges for an orphan girl of Guppi's age, Yathimri, to satisfy his perverted sexual appetite. Although Heer feels guilty for her sin, she has no other way to avoid incest in the family. She suffers silently but smothered her guilt because "Compassion in the eye of a storm was impossible. Child rape was a lesser evil than incest. Or was it?" (Durrani, 1999, p. 112). Heer suffered both a mother's and a woman's pain with condensed hysteria, and her heart bled. She complained to God of His benevolence toward him: "Who is this man, God? Is he exonerated because one of his ancestors was good?" (Durrani, 1999, p. 113). She felt herself, like a "she-devil in the garb of a godmother" (Durrani, 1999, p. 114). Heer was forced to participate in her husband's incestuous affairs and to sleep with other men for his perverted pleasure. She repented every day for the sin and asked for forgiveness from God. She cried in pain, facing Allah on the prayer mat, "Whose sin is this? Mine? Whose world is this? Yours?" (Durrani, 1999, p. 136). Pir Sain's actions were entirely against the

directions given in the Hadis, as Taj Hashmi quotes, "The most perfect believers are the best in conduct. And the best of you are those who are best to their wives" (Durrani, 1999, p. 12). She felt herself tied to Satan and wondered if her contract with the devil was sanctified by Allah.

Despite her suffering, Heer's faith in Allah was never shaken; rather, it was strengthened. She felt an urge to devote herself deeply to God as she was being pushed into the valley of sin. Pir Sain, who prohibited television in his society, brought a TV into his bedroom to further subjugate women and force them to act like prostitutes. Forcing a wife to watch porn is a form of sexual harassment and a sin in religion. He overrides his own standards as a husband; to those outside his own, he preaches morality and the qualities of a good husband, but within the home, his behaviour befits a devil. The obnoxious activities in the haveli expose the corruption and moral decay in divine institutions. The purdah system secures Pir's sin. Heer accepts that every new thing Pir introduced into her life turned out to be a nightmare, impossible to accept and with no time given to adjust (M. Khan, 1995; Shahid et al., 2022).

Despite Pir's dominant ideology of coercion within the haveli, Heer does not surrender. Rather, she challenges him covertly by constantly motivating her elder son Chote Sain that "Your life should be dedicated to Allah" and warns him to stay away from his father's path, which was the "path of the cronies who crawl at his feet" (Durrani, 1999). Heer's instruction to her son to stay away from his father and become like a true saint is undoubtedly an indirect resistance against the corrupt religious institution sustained in the shrine. Though the consequence turned fatal and Chote Sain had to lose his life due to Pir's tyranny, his murder exposed the filth of power politics enshrined in the system of grave worship that crushed any seed of resistance, even if it belonged to its bloodline.

Religious leaders like Pirs are also a manifestation of religious patriarchy within Pakistan's religio-social-political framework. Tehmina Durrani provides an account of how the patriarchal aspects of a community arise from experiences under cultural traditions rather than the religion itself. Adhikari (2014) correctly points out that Tehmina emphasises several motifs through the figure of Pir Sain: "Power makes these religious leaders savages feeding upon their prey; religion being only a veil to cover up malevolence. In such hands, religion is never an instrument to reach the divine, but they try to find out which injunctions of Islam would best suit their interest" (p. 378). Recent legislation and initiatives aiming to reduce gendered oppression in Pakistan highlight the contemporary relevance of such critiques (The Guardian, 2025).

## CONCLUSION

In order to expose the structural oppression ingrained in male-centred interpretations of Islam, this study has critically investigated how women negotiate patriarchal religious authority in Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* and Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*. The challenges of women, Bint Allah and Heer, as social subjects are highlighted by both authors, emphasising the shortcomings of religious leadership that is unfair, hypocritical, and frequently divorced from the moral precepts outlined in the Quran and Hadith. True religious leaders, as M. Khan (2022, pp. 13–14) points out, should focus on fostering a moral and just mindset rather than using unbridled power. The characters in these novels stand in sharp contrast to this ideal, highlighting the discrepancy between moral failure on the part of the individual and public reverence.

The novels show how male religious leaders use religion as a means of bolstering their authority and control over women, in addition to being morally reprehensible. While their authority is flimsy and based on the community's ignorance, women are held accountable for their wrongdoings. The protagonists' efforts within these limitations are depicted by both Saadawi and Durrani, showing how women oppose repressive systems and subvert erroneous interpretations of religious and cultural norms. Through the lived experiences of Bint Allah and Heer, the novels highlight the material, social, and psychological costs of patriarchy, demonstrating that the oppression is structural rather than incidental.

The results of the study emphasise that women's oppression in these contexts is a product of human perceptions influenced by patriarchal norms rather than being a fundamental feature of Islam. By foregrounding women's agency, these novels enhance our understanding of gender, religion, and social reform, illuminating avenues for resistance, resilience, and empowerment. The study also underscores the importance of critically engaging with religious texts and traditions, advocating for interpretations that promote equality, justice, and moral leadership.

To better understand how Islamic feminist frameworks continue to resolve the tensions between tradition, modernity, and social reform, comparative studies could investigate contemporary narratives from South Asia, the Middle East, and other Islamic contexts. Further insights into the societal impact of patriarchal religious authority and the role of women's narratives in fostering social transformation may also be gained through interdisciplinary research combining sociology, literature, and religious studies. Ultimately, Saadawi and Durrani's works are not only significant literary contributions but also forceful appeals for a reconsideration of religious, social, and cultural norms, highlighting that the true meaning of religion lies in compassion, fairness, and the equitable treatment of all members of society.

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