

Women on the Margins: Abjection and Sublimation in
Aysha Baqir's *Beyond the Fields*
(Wanita Tersisih: Abjeksi dan Sublimasi dalam Novel
Beyond the Fields oleh Aysha Baqir)

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ABSTRACT

Aysha Baqir's Beyond the Fields (2019) explores women's struggles under Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in 1980s Pakistan. Pakistani women's subjugation stems from the intersection of colonial legacies, patriarchal and feudal authority, military rule, and socio-spatial hierarchies, which limit their educational opportunities, freedom of choice, and individual agency especially in non-urban, conservative contexts. Women's choices, especially under Zia's regime, were seen as threats to patriarchal structures and were systematically stifled. Central to this repression is the cultural rationale of honour and shame, where women's bodies and conduct are regarded as custodians of family dignity, while men use legal, cultural, and religious frameworks to enforce sanctions against transgression of male authority. Although Beyond the Fields has been analysed from feminist and intersectional perspectives, limited attention has been paid to its representation of abjection and the formation of female subjectivity at the psychic and symbolic levels. This paper addresses this gap through Kristeva's concepts of abjection and sublimation, contributing a psychoanalytic dimension to existing scholarship on the novel's representation of women's experiences in Pakistan. Kristeva's framework of abjection highlights how patriarchal power structures exclude women psychically and symbolically, through religion and law and norms about honour and shame. The paper suggests that Zara, the protagonist, sublimates her response to abjection through reading, redirecting repressed drives into symbolically legitimised acts of agency to reclaim her sense of selfhood. The study also shows how Zara resists the patriarchal symbolic restrictions imposed on her, develops creative agency and self-empowerment.

Keywords: abjection; *Beyond the Fields*; honour; Julia Kristeva; sublimation

ABSTRAK

Beyond the Fields (2019) karya Aysha Baqir menelusuri perjuangan wanita di bawah pemerintahan diktator Zia-ul-Haq di Pakistan pada dekad 1980-an. Penindasan terhadap wanita Pakistan berpunca daripada gabungan warisan kolonial, kuasa patriarki dan feudal, pemerintahan ketenteraan, serta hierarki sosio-ruang yang membataskan mereka daripada peluang pendidikan, kebebasan membuat pilihan, dan agensi individu, khususnya dalam konteks luar bandar yang konservatif. Di bawah rejim Zia, kebebasan wanita untuk membuat pilihan dianggap sebagai ancaman terhadap struktur patriarki dan dikekang secara sistematik. Penindasan ini didasari oleh pemahaman budaya tentang maruah dan aib, di mana tubuh dan kelakuan wanita dilihat sebagai penjaga kehormatan keluarga, manakala lelaki menggunakan kerangka undang-undang, budaya, dan agama untuk mengenakan hukuman terhadap sebarang pelanggaran autoriti lelaki. Beyond the Fields telah dianalisis melalui perspektif feminis dan interseksional, namun masih kurang perhatian diberikan terhadap representasi abjeksi dan pembentukan subjektiviti wanita pada tahap psikis dan simbolik dalam novel ini. Makalah ini mengisi jurang tersebut melalui konsep abjeksi dan sublimasi oleh Julia Kristeva, serta menyumbang dimensi psikoanalitik kepada wacana sedia ada tentang representasi pengalaman wanita di Pakistan dalam novel ini. Melalui kerangka abjeksi, Kristeva menekankan bagaimana struktur kuasa patriarki menyisihkan wanita secara psikis dan simbolik melalui agama, undang-undang dan norma berkaitan

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maruah dan aib. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa Zara, watak utama novel, menggunakan pembacaan sebagai bentuk sublimasi dalam menghadapi abjeksi. Melalui pembacaan, Zara mengalihkan dorongan terpendam kepada tindakan yang boleh diterima dalam aturan simbolik, sekali gus membolehkannya membina semula jati dirinya. Dengan cara ini, Zara menentang batasan patriarki dalam aturan simbolik, bertindak secara kreatif dan memperkasakan dirinya.

Kata Kunci: abjeksi; Beyond the Fields; Julia Kristeva; maruah; sublimasi

INTRODUCTION

Women's marginalisation in Pakistan is rooted in colonial imprints, military regimes, and feudal practices. The nation saw a new era of authoritarianism in the 1980s in the name of Islamization. The process of so-called Islamization began during the final ten years of the Cold War under the martial law of Zia-ul-Haq (Afzal et al., 2022), Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, who imposed martial law in 1977 and ruled until 1988. His Islamisation programme included the Hudood Ordinances (Lau, 2007) and shaped societal attitudes in which women's autonomy was often seen as questionable. Even so, during this period, women in Pakistan exhibited diverse forms of resistance against patriarchal structures in society. The Women's Action Forum, founded in 1981 as a reaction to discriminatory laws, serves as a key example of coordinated defiance, campaigning for women's legal and social rights through demonstrations, activism, and legal channels (Shaheed, 2010; Imran & Munir, 2018). First held in 2018, the Aurat March challenges patriarchal norms (Kelso, 2024) and provides a contemporary context for reading bodily autonomy, education, and agency in Pakistani Anglophone fiction, including *Beyond the Fields*.

Moreover, independent acts of resistance, such as defying family restrictions to achieve academic aspirations, entering unorthodox professions, and confronting restrictive norms within the domestic space, also represent significant forms of resistance. The case of Qandeel Baloch, a social media sensation who was later killed by her own brother in the name of honour in 2016, represents the ongoing struggle of women to opt for professions deemed transgressive by society. Imran and Munir (2018) discuss the emergence of resistance forces against Zia's oppressive laws, highlighting the role of women's organisations, legal aid groups, activist writers, theatre groups, and documentary filmmakers in advocating for gender equality and human rights. These efforts, led by individuals such as Asma Jahangir, played a pivotal role in challenging Zia's Islamisation policies and promoting socio-political reforms. These acts of defiance, both at the societal and individual levels, reflect the ongoing battle against systemic patriarchy in Pakistan.

Aysha Baqir's debut novel, *Beyond the Fields* (2019), explores institutionalised patriarchy and its impact on women in Pakistan. The narrative portrays the dynamics of oppressive forces, women's abjection, and their struggle for subjectivity. The novel's depiction of marginality, gendered boundaries, and female autonomy provides a basis for examining the understudied relationship between abjection and women's subjectivity. Using Kristeva's concepts of abjection and sublimation, the study examines how encounters with the abject shape women's subjectivity. The protagonist's experiences of patriarchal oppression, the effects of abjection on her identity, and her defiance through sublimation reflect the novel's concern with gender, religion, societal values, and identity in Pakistan.

Under this socio-historical context of Pakistan, Kristeva's theory of abjection presents an engaging lens to comprehend women's marginalisation and pursuit of empowerment. Abjection, as proposed by Kristeva, is the process of excluding that which destabilises identity and the framework of social conventions. Within male-dominated societies, women, frequently linked to physicality and emotions, are placed closer to the domain of the abject, which is considered

unclean or disruptive to normative order (Oliver, 1993). In *Beyond the Fields*, male-dominated structures render Pakistani women abject by curtailing and regulating their physical autonomy, thereby forcing them to the margins of societal validation and limiting their opportunities for empowerment and self-actualisation, as reflected through Zara's journey. Her identity, shaped by familial authority, social norms, and religious values, reveals a constant negotiation between individual autonomy and collective cultural norms and regulations. This aligns with Kristeva's notion of "I," a state of subjectivity, which is persistently confronted and subverted by the societal forces that work to shape Zara as "other" in the novel.

Women's desires in Pakistan, such as the pursuit of education, spouse choice, or veiling liberty, are considered deviant since they confront patriarchal values of male surveillance, gender roles, and family honour, resulting in social resistance and internal shame since women negotiate individual choices with rigid societal expectations (Agha, 2015). The patriarchal symbolic order in Pakistan, reinforced through social indoctrination, linguistic patterns, and legal and normative controls, perpetuates the continuity of patriarchal norms and the subjugation of those who transgress these sanctioned codes. In this regard, abjection helps reveal women's disempowerment by exposing the psychological and social implications of being placed outside the prevailing symbolic order. Baqir's *Beyond the Fields* captures this through the protagonist's personal dreams and wish for accountability. Through the novel, Baqir encapsulates the struggles of Pakistani women to assert their voices by suggesting that abjection and agency are intertwined in the pursuit of self-definition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PAKISTANI WOMEN'S WRITING IN ENGLISH, AYSHA BAQIR'S *BEYOND THE FIELDS*, AND KRISTEVA'S ABJECTION

Pakistani women's writings in English have developed and sought to highlight the themes of national identity, gender inequality, honour, inheritance, women's resilience, and environmental justice. Cilano (2013) argues that Pakistani fiction focuses on historical events, nationalism, ecology, martial law, and feminism and how they intersect with accounts of identity and belonging to places and memories. For instance, Kamila Shamsie's novels, like *Burnt Shadows* and *Kartography*, portray sectarian and ethnic tensions based on partition, whereas Uzma Khan's novels, *Trespassing* and *The Geometry of God* confront narratives that engage with gendered nationalism and Islamophobia through ecological and feminist frameworks (Kanwal 2015; Rahman 2019). In contrast, Shamsie's *Broken Verses* (2005) reflects the conflicting experiences of noncompliant and conformist women, underscoring the repressive socio-political milieu of Zia's dictatorship, which restricted women's choices and reasserted patriarchal values (Khan et al., 2024). In *The Pakistani Bride*, Bapsi Sidhwa addresses issues of forced marriage and violence in the name of honour, and uncovers the clash between female agency and social compliance (Ross, 2022). Likewise, *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz critically reflects male domination through cultural and religious practices, especially female bodies and inheritance. Together, these writers critique androcentrism and extremism in Pakistani society (Cilano, 2013). At the same time, their works reframe Pakistani fiction as a space of resistance and a site for rethinking national and transnational discourse on gender, identity, and environment (Rahman, 2019).

Baqir's *Beyond the Fields* (2019) further contributes to this tradition of feminist perspectives in Pakistani Anglophone fiction through its depiction of the suffering and resilience of women who endure violence under patriarchal norms. Within Pakistani society, notions of honor and shame act as tools to control women's conduct, connecting family honor to their modesty and submission, reinforcing patriarchal control (Baqir, 2023). Both honour and shame define acceptable female behaviour, with conduct deemed deviant being socially rejected (Shroff, 2021). Past studies on *Beyond the Fields* have predominantly focused on linguistic investigation of gender-based marginalisation, showing how language upholds gender stereotyping and cultural exclusion. Kanwal (2023), for instance, presents a feminist stylistic examination of the novel and highlights how women in Pakistani society face gender-based stereotypes and sexism. The study also suggests that education and free will can break these stigmas. Kanwal advocates equal autonomy for both genders in marriage-related decisions. Shakoor et al. (2023) further examine the novel's linguistic elements and show how language reflects the subordination of lower-middle-class women in rural Pakistan, who are portrayed as powerless and confined to conventional roles. Similarly, women's suffering in rural Pakistan is rooted in patriarchy and repressive norms like non-consensual marriages and honour killings (Rauf et al., 2024). Cultural imperialism, as their study reflects, normalises and perpetuates patriarchal norms, positioning women as "others" and imposing predetermined roles and responsibilities upon them. Their framework reveals the systematic exploitation, disempowerment, and gender-based violence, which calls for social transformation. Moreover, Anwer and Chaudhary (2024) analyse the novel through an intersectional lens to examine the challenges faced by rural women in South Punjab. They highlight how the intersection of gender and class upholds patriarchal control over women and hinders their agency and right to resources. Amid prevailing social constraints, the female characters in the novel resist through collective agency and subversion, confront patriarchal structures and pursue justice. Their study contributes to intersectional feminism by highlighting women's realities within interdependent systems of subordination.

While previous studies of *Beyond the Field* have argued, through linguistic-stylistic and intersectional frameworks, that the novel's female characters face socio-cultural and linguistic marginalisation, they leave the psychic and symbolic processes through which women are framed as abject subjects understudied. A Kristevan reading addresses this gap by examining how patriarchy produces abjection and how sublimation redirects its effects into reconstructed subjectivity, adding a psychoanalytic account to existing feminist interpretations. This framework connects the novel's treatment of honour, shame, and marginalisation to the formation of female subjectivity and interprets Zara's reading as a form of sublimation through which she sustains her aspirations and develops a sense of agency under patriarchal control.

Kristeva's abjection has been used to examine women's fictional experiences in various literary geographical settings beyond the Pakistani context. In Elif Shafak's novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, abjection is portrayed as a process of social exclusion through the character of Leila, a sex worker who endures physical violence and familial rejection and is treated as social waste. This depiction positions abjection as both psychological trauma and a mechanism of symbolic suppression within androcentric boundaries (Mehdi et al., 2022). Their study mirrors the ostracised women in *Beyond the Fields*, where the protagonist's sister is shunned after her rape and married off to a pimp. In the context of Palestinian fiction, Amin et al. (2020) examine Huzama's *Velvet* to show how Arab women confront patriarchy and gender stereotypes to reclaim identities through subverting traits of abjection, thereby emphasising an alternative gender discourse in the Arab context. In their analysis, abjection is manifested through emotional

repulsion, physical abuse, and the collapse of the maternal role, with the application of abjection as a psychic split and societal experience through which the female protagonist challenges patriarchy, achieves her exclusive identity, and uses the disruptive power of abjection to resist the conventional roles enforced on women by patriarchal structures. Their study sheds light on women's experiences under religious patriarchal structures in the Muslim world more broadly and is particularly relevant to the Pakistani context for its exploration of similar themes of marginalised women's suffering and resistance. In the African-American literary context, Keita (2018) applies the concept of abjection to Morrison's *God Help the Child* and highlights abjection as centred on racial trauma, maternal exclusion, and societal shaming that underscore the novel's exploration of identity crisis and redemption. From the perspective of Blackness and toxic mothering, Keita's analysis also highlights the potential role of social abjection as a space of healing and catharsis. An inquiry from the Chinese context on Lisa See's *Peony in Love* demonstrates both disruptive and transformative potentials of abjection, whereby the protagonist, Peony, subverts societal boundaries through the acts of maternal reunion, writing, and women's solidarity (Poh et al. 2021). The findings from Poh et al.'s study resonate with the current study, which also argues for the dual role of abjection, such as disruption and sublimation of abject dreams.

Collectively, the scholarship discussed above suggests that abjection offers a powerful lens for understanding women's marginalisation across diverse social contexts. Abjection not only functions as a tool of marginalisation and control but also offers a form of resistance and transformation across different geographical and cultural contexts. The plight and resistance of women shown in these narratives resemble the struggles of women in Pakistan. Applying Kristeva's concept of abjection to South Asian fiction is crucial because it reveals how patriarchal and cultural systems construct women as abject and regulate their desires through symbolic prohibitions. This paper's reading of *Beyond the Fields* highlights the tension between symbolic rules and semiotic desires within the patriarchal landscape of rural Pakistan, while also demonstrating how their abject condition becomes the foundation from which agency and transformation emerge.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper uses a qualitative-interpretive approach through close reading of Aysha Baqir's novel, *Beyond the Fields*. It analyses the novel's portrayal of Zara, its protagonist, through textual evidence from the novel, focusing on selected scenes, dialogue, characterisation, symbols, dreams, and other elements to trace her experiences of abjection and sublimation. The analysis considers how Zara encounters social, cultural, religious, and gendered limits and navigates or reconstructs them.

Kristeva presented a psychoanalytic theory of abjection in her celebrated 1982 essay, *Powers of Horror*. This paper draws on her two interlinked concepts. Firstly, abjection is the process by which an impure or dangerous subject or desire is cast out of the symbolic order (Kristeva, 1982). Secondly, sublimation is a mediating or transformative process through which repressed drives are redirected into creative or socially acceptable forms, such as reading, writing, and recovery. Kristeva sheds light on abjection as a psychic and social process through which societies expel anything that might disrupt their sense of order (Kristeva, 1982). Fundamentally, abjection is a society's way of rejecting what is considered "unclean," "improper," or dangerous. For Kristeva, abjection elaborates the ambivalent mechanism of subject construction in which

things that the self is unable to assimilate are rejected, disowned, and designated as disgusting. According to Arya (2014), abjection is a dynamic process that is pivotal to identity formation and continues throughout an individual's life. The process of abjection that leads towards identity construction can also be seen as a social occurrence. Since the idea of self is considered as something clean, pure, proper, and undisturbed or stable, Kristeva (1982) views the abject as othered in society, as she argues, “as jettisoned. Parachuted by the Other” (p. 9).

Similarly, Douglas (2003) argues that the unclean is anything that is avoided or rejected, for it transgresses social norms and values. Douglas further elaborates that uncleanliness is a cultural insight of anything that exists outside the system and that can pollute a person or society as a whole. To counter and maintain their control, societies keep whatever is considered impure, unclean, or unstable out. Consequently, anything that is in-between is regarded as dangerous and menacing as it is not part of the social system. For Kristeva, the notion of unclean is linked with the notion of abject, which is ambiguous and ambivalent in nature. Considering this, the abject is also regarded as a form of resistance and challenge to patriarchal control. For that matter, the male hegemonic social order regards abjection as an indispensable phenomenon for maintaining power and purity. It can be argued that abjection is not only an individual but also a collaborative experience, considering that social, cultural, and religious aspects play a crucial role in the process of individuation.

Abjection refers to the marginalisation and exclusion of individuals who disrupt social norms, while the symbolic order represents the patriarchal system grounded in masculinity, purity, and paternal authority (Poh et al., 2021). Within this order, women are positioned as weak because maternal comfort is replaced by the paternal function of language, a substitution Kristeva describes as taking “the place of the good maternal object that is wanting” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 45). For Kristeva (1986), men rely on the very phenomenon of sexual difference to uphold their dominant position in a society. If women try to obtain the phallus or enter into the male-dominant symbolic order, it can threaten the deep-rooted patriarchal system. As Kristeva says, “male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed. That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 70). Supporting this Kristevan view, Grosz (2012) argues that the marginalisation of the abject is the precondition of symbolic rule. In essence, to maintain the power structure and masculinity, the symbolic structure must quell all the attempts made by the female body to break the shackles.

The symbolic order is associated with patriarchal structures, the rules of language, law, religion, social norms, and cultural constraints that determine social order (Kristeva, 1984). In her viewpoint, abjection is reflected through an unshakable adherence to law, morality, and religion (Kristeva, 1982). These tools of abjection foster shame and repression that lead to further female marginalisation and disempowerment. Kristeva (1982) further suggests that women find themselves split as social norms stigmatise certain experiences or desires as “abject,” which are impossible to escape, and individuals remain haunted by what society insists they reject. On sublimation, Kristeva (1982) says, “in the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime” (p. 11). Sublimation, in this sense, offers a transformation of the abject desires into a source of agency or empowerment. It is both a transformative and resistant process, for it warrants the subject to address their inner drives, shaping novel ways of identity construction while confronting the repression and social norms by offering sites of creativity and self-discovery (Kristeva, 2010). To support this Kristevan notion, Oliver (2004) argues, “anger and aggression redirected outward or

sublimated into creative expression can renew agency and self-esteem” (p. 94). In addition, Russell (2013) shares similar views on Kristevan sublimation, deeming it a form of creative working through. Kristeva’s viewpoint on sublimation is feminist and projects women’s role in sublimation, unlike Freud’s, which is androcentric and general in its applicability, as it calls for redirection of drives into socially acceptable behaviours instead of meaningful, transformative, and resistant acts.

There has been an upward trend in discussions and studies related to abjection and its relevance to subject matters such as identity formation, female subjugation, and the marginalisation of minorities in diverse cultures and societies. In a traditional society such as Pakistan, the process of abjection is manifested through various legal, cultural, and familial control systems that cast women’s voices, desires, and autonomy as impure. It embeds control through mechanisms like the Hudood Ordinance wrapped in Islamisation, gendered honour codes, and ritualised shame. All these mechanisms mirror the symbolic boundaries that keep women subjugated to maintain social and cultural rule in the name of traditions. Although developed within a European psychoanalytic tradition, Kristeva’s concepts can illuminate the reading of South Asian fictional narratives, such as Baqir’s *Beyond the Fields*, particularly in unpacking the intersecting legal, moral, and religious patterns that shape South Asian women’s marginalisation. In this regard, Kristeva’s notions of abjection and sublimation help unpack how Pakistani fiction and culture reflect both women’s subjugation and resistance. The framework therefore attends to the novel’s specific structures rather than universalising Pakistani women’s experiences.

Within Pakistani patriarchal symbolic orders, women’s desires for movement, imagination, and expressive freedom are frequently framed as dangerous or transgressive, particularly when religious belief, moral instruction, and familial authority converge to regulate the female body as a site of honour and contamination. Within the contexts shaped by kinship law, honour culture, and patriarchal religious interpretation, women’s aspirations, such as personal autonomy, are often constructed as violations of the symbolic order, rendering such desires grounds for abjection rather than legitimate self-development. However, Pakistani women continue to challenge patriarchy in creative, subtle ways rather than through formal, overt means (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). The body and identity are crucial to navigating power and subjectivity for women in Pakistan, reflecting the sublimation of internalised drives into agency (Pari & Ali, 2025). From a Kristevan perspective, sublimation draws attention to forms of agency that emerge through covert practices such as reading, imaginative projection, and relational affiliation, particularly in contexts where overt resistance is foreclosed by patriarchal control. As Beardsworth (2004) explains, Kristeva’s sublimation functions as a process through which suffering is transformed into meaningful activity, enabling subjects to negotiate psychic pain without fully assimilating to dominant norms.

It can be argued that Kristeva’s framework of abjection and the transformative process of sublimation offer a dynamic lens to examine women’s marginalisation in rural Pakistan, particularly during Zia’s era and within the feudal setup in rural Punjab. By underscoring the process of marginalisation and resistance, this theoretical framework highlights the transformative potential of sublimation for women to rearticulate their subjectivity and confront oppressive forces. Baqir’s *Beyond the Fields* offers a narrative of hope, as it portrays how women confront their abjection and negotiate the symbolic structures through the process of sublimation.

DISCUSSION

MANIFESTATION OF WOMEN'S ABJECTION IN *BEYOND THE FIELDS*

Set in the rural areas of Bahawalpur in southern Punjab, Pakistan, during Zia's dictatorship, Baqir's *Beyond the Fields* (2019) portrays the marginalisation of women by patriarchal society in multiple ways. They face abjection and lack of agency through legal, religious, and gender-based control systems. The narrative is divided symbolically into four books: Journey, Bahawalpur, Lahore, and Home, highlighting themes of subjugation, survival, and the search for justice. The plot centres on Zara and her twin sister Tara, who is raped but denied justice due to the gendered implications of the Hudood Ordinance and the Law of Evidence, which require a rape victim to prove the sexual assault or face punishment for adultery. Subsequently, Tara is married to a stranger to restore the family honour. Zara is compelled to suppress her feelings, dreams, and choices by her family, which adheres to the symbolic rules of the society. However, she tries to resist the patriarchal structure and faces numerous challenges in rescuing her sister and gaining agency through sublimated acts of reading and forming relationships.

To this end, Kristeva's notion of abjection can be used to unpack the dominance of patriarchy in Pakistan as represented in the narrative. The concept of abjection necessitates that anything that threatens the "identity, system and order" and "what does not respect borders, positions, rules" is excluded (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The dreams, desires, and choices of women in rural Pakistan are repressed as they pose a considerable threat to the patriarchy (Agha, 2015). Abjected, Zara is forced to repress her dreams due to her gender. Abjection can be a real threat, causing harm to the subject emotionally as "it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). It is pertinent in the case of abused twin sisters in the novel, where their marginalisation engulfs them with a plethora of implications, both physically and emotionally. Arguing on the matter of subjectivity, Kristeva says it is not a static entity but a dynamic process, implying that its formation requires a navigation between the patriarchal symbolic order and the semiotic desires for women (McAfee, 2004). In the novel, the protagonist's journey and struggle to find her agency portray her navigation between oppressive male-dominant traditions, norms, rules, and a world of desires where she reunites with maternal figures in search of her dreams to be realised. The search for justice serves to transform feelings of intense anger or a desire for punishment into a socially acceptable act, thereby constituting a form of sublimation. Likewise, reading and forging relationships channel basic human desires into socially acceptable behaviours through expressing repressed urges. While Islamic teachings include protections for women's rights to education, consent, and inheritance, the novel portrays how these are overridden by cultural practices and patriarchal reinterpretations. Zara's abject dream of education is forbidden in the narrative, unlike her brother Omer's. Her gender-specific marginalisation is reflected in the novel as she says, "Omer was going to start boarding school and I was going to start work as a maid" (Baqir, 2019, p. 12). Her aspiration for education is considered a threat to the male symbolic order, as Saigol (2016) asserts that education is a powerful tool that challenges the roots of masculine supremacy and religious orthodoxy, making it a force of disruption and change in Pakistan. The law of the father in her family denies her autonomy and identity, which she describes as, "I wasn't free yet. I was caged from the tip of my head to the soles of my slippers. Abba said I didn't have a choice" (Baqir, 2019, p. 9). The reason for disallowing girls an education is reflected in the narrator's words: "they start to think for themselves and . . ." (Baqir, 2019, p. 103). The ellipsis here implies the perceived consequences of women's independent thinking, such as confronting conventional roles or the patriarchal social order, and it responds in an oppressive manner to maintain the status

quo. The novel reveals how religious interpretations are manipulated to justify women's oppression, despite the original egalitarian intentions of Islamic teachings.

The norms and traditions are so influential in Pakistani society that Zara tries to convince her aunt, Bari Masi, about the rights of women in Islam, to which she says, "our traditions and customs give meaning to our life. We must preserve and protect them. Surely, you're not saying our fathers and forefathers were wrong?" (Baqir, 2019, p. 273). Similarly, her curiosity about women's lack of autonomy in marriage is treated as dangerous, as seen when Zara tells her sister that their religion permits women to choose their own partners, "our religion gives us that right, you know," only for Tara to warn her, "Shush, you'll get into trouble" (Baqir, 2019, p. 97). This suggests how women internalise patriarchal rules in the name of traditions and enforce them on the next generation, thereby doubly abjecting their gender and pushing female bodies to the margins of society to maintain, in Kristevan terms, its symbolic order. Moreover, Zara's narrates her exclusion from inheritance as, "unmarried girls didn't own land or property in our village. Sons inherited all of it. They carried the family name. Abba's land would go to Omer. Our dowry was for our in-laws. There was nothing for us. I knew that. I had been told that" (Baqir, 2019, p. 46). Zara is not only deprived of education and inheritance, but her aspirations for them are regarded as abject and pose a challenge to the gendered boundaries of social order. She is furious about women's roles in her patriarchal surroundings when she raises her concerns about the gendered justice system, but her voice is dismissed. Instead of protesting, women in the village advise her mother to ensure her daughters stay indoors, since they are responsible for their honour after Tara's rape, enraging Zara: "a wildfire blazed inside my chest. Why were they giving up?" (Baqir, 2019, p. 287). She also expresses her frustration over social norms where men tie women's bodies to honour and use them for their power, stating, "men encase our honour in a glass showcase and then shatter it with rocks. They put us under burkas and then strip us. What kind of justice is that? They suck honour from us like marrow from the bone to strengthen their power, their name" (Baqir, 2019, pp. 281-82).

The symbolic order that constructs the 'proper' woman in this setting demands modesty, passivity, silence, marriage without protest, and remaining uneducated. Zara narrates her mother's expectations of a good married girl who obeys her father, husband, and in-laws as "once you're married, you have to keep your husband and in-laws happy and give them no reason to complain. You must do what they say, with a smile and without questions" (Baqir, 2019, p. 86). The textual evidence here alludes to Zara's aspirations to read, question, desire, and act independently. By confronting symbolic rules, she becomes abject, marked as inappropriate and rebellious, as she says, "my obedience was a yardstick of my parents' standing in our village. If I rebelled, I dishonoured them and my family name" (Baqir, 2019, p. 56). Her marginalisation, in the form of cultural taboos such as her repressed desires and visibility tied to her family honour, goes beyond women's structural subjugation to mark their lived cultural and social abjection in Pakistan's rural perspective. This embodies Karim's (2019) proposition regarding cultural taboos imposed on women. Karim notes that narratives of honour and shame operate as mechanisms of policing women's sexuality in Pakistani fiction. *Beyond the Fields* reflects the regulation of abject dreams, as articulated by Kristeva, in postcolonial lived experiences.

As Kristeva (1982) emphasises, "an unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside." (p. 16). In *Beyond the Fields*, this mechanism is evident in the religious taboo imposed by Zara's mother: "Amma had forbidden us to look in the mirror... The devil lurked behind the glass, waiting to catch young girls who peered inside" (Baqir, 2019, p. 40). Such prohibitions do more than regulate

behaviour, as they prevent the emergence of self-awareness and desire. As McAfee (2004) notes, these prohibitions are enforced to protect the social order from threats. In Zara's case, the ban on self-reflection functions as an abject barrier, denying her the right to recognise herself as a subject, thereby reinforcing her internalised shame and fragmented sense of self. Singing, like mirror-gazing, is strictly forbidden as a form of self-expression for unmarried girls in rural Pakistani culture, as the novel describes, "Amma had forbidden her (Zara) from singing aloud, saying it would entice the jinns" (Baqir, 2019, p. 42). Although framed as religious injunctions, such prohibitions are deeply rooted in cultural norms that conflate female visibility with moral danger. Similarly, the burqa functions as another mechanism through which Zara's identity is obscured under the guise of religious propriety. While her brother, Omer, is permitted to dress freely, Zara is forced by Amma to wear the burqa or a heavy chador whenever she steps outside. She articulates this enforced containment: "I was caged from the tip of my head to the soles of my slippers. Abba said I didn't have a choice. Amma said burqa gave me freedom" (Baqir, 2019, p. 9). Here, the burqa becomes a symbol of abjection, an imposed boundary that denies her subjectivity and confines her agency within the limits of patriarchal respectability. Acts that challenge this dress code are perceived as morally threatening because they disrupt the symbolic order that depends on controlling women's bodies to sustain social hierarchy. Collectively, these prohibitions reflect a coherent logic of abjection, whereby Zara is denied sight, voice, and presence.

For Kristeva, the abject is what must be expelled to preserve the symbolic order. By preventing Zara from seeing herself, expressing herself, or being seen by others, the social order forces her into a space of non-identity, where she exists only as honour's vessel rather than as a speaking subject. This enforced non-identity also embodies social control and a fear of Zara's self-recognition and desires. According to Kristeva (1982), certain bodies, especially women's, are deemed impure or threatening by a society when they pose any form of danger to its order. Law and customs are used to control the abject in such a system. *Beyond the Fields* shows how women's bodies are treated as sites of shame and legal scepticism in Pakistan through discriminatory laws during Zia's Islamization drive. The gender disparity in the Law of Evidence is clearly illustrated by the rule that two women's testimony equals one man in the court of law, as reflected through Zara's words, "was I half of my brother?" (Baqir, 2019, p. 63). Likewise, the Offence of Zina Ordinance required either the accused's confession or testimony from four adult Muslim male eyewitnesses before a court could impose *hadd*, a fixed punishment prescribed under Islamic law, for rape. A complainant who could not establish rape risked being accused of *zina*, or consensual sexual intercourse outside marriage (Lau, 2007). Together, these misogynistic laws framed women's bodies as sources of disorder, unruliness, and untrustworthiness.

When Tara, Zara's sister, is raped by the landlord's men, such institutionalised oppression is reflected through the community's behaviour. The villagers gather and warn her father against reporting the case, citing a lack of substantial evidence. The scene is described by Zara as, "new laws that say the victim has to prove rape. Otherwise, he or she can be found guilty" (Baqir, 2019, p. 126). Although the perpetrators are known to all, Zara's father refrains from reporting it to the police, fearing his daughter could be charged with adultery, which could be regarded as a "crime against the state" and subsequently punished. This legal abjection is further reinforced by social coercion, as Zara's uncle warns, "who will want to marry her once you speak out? Even relatives break off ties in these circumstances" (Baqir, 2019, p. 127). Her brother echoes this fear, "the new laws are against us. And if the news gets out, we lose our honour and risk shaming our family name" (Baqir, 2019, p. 133). Thus, the female body becomes the legal and symbolic site of

contamination, where suffering is transformed into shame, and violated women are expelled from both justice and community.

The cultural and legal structures in rural Pakistan place female victims in a state of double abjection, first through the violence inflicted upon them, and then the silence imposed in the name of honour and shame. Instead of supporting victims, families and communities prioritise the preservation of symbolic norms. As Zara holds, “It was about shame and dishonour. Rape shamed and dishonoured. No one spoke about it” (p. 288). Seeking to “restore” their honour, Zara’s parents disassociate from Tara and marry her to a pimp, who disguises himself as a good man but takes her to a brothel where her body is repeatedly violated. Zara witnesses this abjection in silence, not out of apathy but due to her systemic disempowerment, which demonstrates how women bear the brunt of a social order sustained by cultural and legal frameworks that perpetuate their abjection. Her experiences mirror the Kristevan notion of the polluted female body, adapted here to the Pakistani patriarchal context. Within this framework, women are not only denied justice but are burdened with the responsibility to prove their own innocence, which is a challenging demand that reinforces their marginalisation. Zara’s story exposes how justice is obstructed by the very institutions, such as state, society, and family, that claim to protect the vulnerable. Yet, despite the severity of such laws, Pakistani women continue to challenge these draconian frameworks and assert their right to dignity and subjecthood.

In the public sphere, Zia-era feminist mobilisations, most notably the Women’s Action Forum and figures like Asma Jehangir, contested legal and religious regimes that heightened women’s vulnerability, exposing how honour and shame were instrumentalised to sustain male authority. *Beyond the Fields* translates this landscape into Zara’s intimate milieu. Rather than marching or litigating, she sublimates abjection into agency through reading and forging supportive relationships, a form of resistance available within her social world. Framing her trajectory alongside contemporaneous collective struggle suggests the possibility that both overt mobilisation and covert sublimation operate on a continuum of resistance, thus revealing how subjectivity is rearticulated even when structural change is foreclosed.

NEGOTIATION FOR EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SUBLIMATION

Beyond the Fields depicts a deeply rooted patriarchal order that continually obstructs Zara’s pursuit of empowerment. From the beginning, she confronts cultural and familial forces that prioritise conventional gender roles and familial honour over female autonomy. Her parents refuse to acknowledge her aspirations for education and personal agency, as she reflects: “my obedience was a yardstick of my parents’ standing in our village. If I rebelled, I dishonoured them and my family name” (Baqir, 2019, p. 56). Violence, social isolation, and stigma are the fears she harbours, as several girls in her environment have faced repercussions for transgressing the established symbolic norms. These challenges leave her to negotiate for empowerment on her own. Despite these pressures, she continues to negotiate her abject position, even when her efforts do not yield immediate or equitable outcomes. She transforms her traumatic experiences through sublimation and tries to reclaim her agency and define her sense of subjectivity. Sublimation transforms abject experiences of intense emotions, pain, or forbidden desires into creative, cerebral, or culturally acceptable expressions. Zara transforms her suffering into activism through modalities such as reading, learning, resistance, and the symbolic reclamation of subjectivity, aligning with Kristeva’s concept of sublimation.

Literature, as Kristeva suggests, is a form of sublimation that provides symbolic expression of psychic crises, allowing the abject subject to confront them through catharsis (Kristeva, 1982). In the novel, Zara turns to reading, converting her fear and suffering into intellectual and imaginative agency. She secretly immerses herself in adventure narratives: “*Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tarzan* and *Jungle Book*, tossed me into adventures and hurled me into undiscovered lands. I was hooked” (Baqir, 2019, p. 56) – alongside histories of the Mughals, Europeans and World Wars, nurturing her dream of education. She narrates her moment of agency through imagination, which she achieved through reading: “the books and lessons sparked ideas and questions” (Baqir, 2019, p. 56). These books portray male adventures, female resilience, and leadership. Razia Sultana’s story, the first woman ruler of the Delhi Sultanate and a strong leader who refused to veil, inspired resilience in Zara to achieve empowerment in her patriarchal culture. Furthermore, the stories of male characters sparked her imagination to break free from male-dominated environments and to discover new worlds beyond her own. Reading, thus, becomes a sublimative act as she transforms abjection into curiosity and fear into intellectual pursuit. Zara admits, “I’m not afraid anymore. I find escapades in books,” revealing how literature provides both catharsis and an emerging sense of subjectivity. Supported by Omer’s advocacy for her education, she begins to develop her sense of self by turning curiosity and adversity into self-realisation.

Zara draws inspiration from stories of resistance, especially from figures like Muhammad Ali, who, despite being banned and imprisoned, fought back to become a boxing world champion. Writing about his struggles, wins, and losses gives Zara a language of empowerment. Motivated by this spirit, she initiates a plan to rescue Tara from Heera Mandi. In an act of active agency, she declares “this is our only chance to get Tara out” (Baqir, 2019, p. 218). This marks a pivotal moment where Zara sublimates her marginalisation into protective revolt, embodying Kristeva’s idea of turning abjection into a creative force. She becomes expressive and action-oriented, moving beyond her earlier compliance and silence. Zara’s transformation also catalyses a shift in her mother. Initially, Amma upholds patriarchal norms of honour and shame. She was complicit in matters that harmed Tara by marrying her to a pimp and stopping her daughters from getting education. Her acceptance and silence over patriarchal norms underscore her own internalisation of patriarchal values. However, Zara’s resilience, Master Saab’s (her teacher’s) support, Tara’s return, and her own reflection transform her role from enforcer of patriarchal values to women’s agency. Zara gets permission from her mother to pursue an education after she recovers Tara, as her Amma permits her, “you have to decide that” (Baqir, 2019, p. 293). The moment her mother grants her permission to pursue education, Zara transforms social boundaries into a quest for knowledge, channelling her emotions and dreams into personal growth.

In addition, upon Tara’s recovery, Zara’s mother confronts her husband despite his anger and insists on bringing Tara back as, “no more discussions and no more listening to others. We listen to our hearts now. We take Tara home.” Hearing this, Zara’s father expresses his surprise and growls, but the mother voices her strength in such words: “we take Tara back home!” (Baqir, 2019, p. 269). As the narration unfolds, Zara transforms her fear of symbolic norms and rules into resilience, as she reflects, “I wasn’t afraid anymore. I could do anything if I put my mind to it” (Baqir, 2019, p. 153). Articulating her empowerment in rich imagery, Zara states, “I soared higher and higher. I was up in the sky. Flying beyond my village, beyond the fields [...] I had been knocked down, lost a few rounds, but won more” (Baqir, 2019, p. 293). Zara’s words about soaring beyond her village and fields reflect Beardsworth’s (2004) emphasis that sublimation is a

redefining and meaningful act, in which hardships are reworked into agency and the formation of significant freedom.

Consequently, she establishes her position in the symbolic order by forging relationships with Omer, her mother, and her teacher, Master Saab, who provides reading material and encourages her to get an education whenever he visits their home. Rather than rejecting society entirely, she confronts and reconfigures its religious, cultural, and legal structures by seeking education, employment, and self-learning. Her fearlessness of the fields, where Tara's body was polluted, manifests her resilience to engage with past trauma and transform it into empowerment. Thus, sublimation in the novel is reflected in Zara's emergence as an agentic subject who critiques the restrictions the patriarchal symbolic order imposes on women. Concurrently, her narrative shows that individual resistance, while meaningful, cannot fully dismantle systemic oppression without broader social transformation. Even so, her agency resonates with Kristeva's view that change begins at the level of the individual subject and can, over time, contribute to wider collective shifts.

CONCLUSION

This study has delved into the multifaceted manifestations of legal, religious, and gendered abjection imposed on Zara in *Beyond the Fields* during Zia-ul-Haq's martial law and Islamisation policies, particularly through the Hudood Ordinances and patriarchal symbolic norms. It examines the impact of these structures on women's subjectivity within rural, feudal settings in Pakistan, where female bodies and choices are controlled under the pretext of honour and shame. Through Kristeva's concept of abjection, the analysis provides a reading of how Zara and her sister Tara are subjected to silencing, expulsion, and dehumanisation, experiences that reflect the broader marginalisation of women in such contexts. Yet, the study also highlights Zara's negotiation of these constraints through sublimation, as she transforms trauma into a pursuit of knowledge, resilience, and symbolic agency. By turning to education, imagination, and relational solidarity, she gradually reclaims a sense of self within an environment designed to suppress it. *Beyond the Fields* lays bare the brutality of patriarchal Pakistani norms, but it also reveals the latent potential for resistance within abjection. Zara's ability to channel suffering into meaningful action aligns with Kristeva's understanding of identity as a dynamic process that oscillates between the symbolic order and individual freedom. In this way, *Beyond the Fields* underscores that while systemic oppression persists, acts of sublimation can mark the first step toward ethical awakening, self-assertion, and the possibility of collective transformation. Future studies could compare representations of women's abjection and subjectivity across Pakistani and other South Asian fiction through postcolonial and contextually grounded feminist approaches.

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