Voices of Hope and Despair: Themes in the Lives and English Language Works of Women Creative Writers of Pakistani Heritage Published in the Last Decade.

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Abstract

The present study explored the bipolar psychosocial dimensions of hope and despair through corresponding themes in the lives and works of twelve English language women creative writers of Pakistani heritage who had their work published during the years 2000 to 2010. Themes and data obtained from publication reviews, autobiographical and biographical essays, and videotaped and published interviews were analyzed. The study was conducted from the participant – observer standpoint. The analytic induction method of constant comparison was used which is generally helpful in generating social theory. The study answers the research questions: 1.What is the predominant psychosocial factor in the bipolar dimensions of hope and despair among women creative writers as shown by themes portrayed in their work? And 2.Does the nature of life themes of Pakistani women creative writers affect the derived psychosocial factor of hope or despair shown in their work? The study revealed hope as the predominant factor and validated the effect of the nature of life themes on both bipolar dimensions of hope and despair. A total of thirteen themes emerged from the four categories of developmental events, professional situations, personality characteristics and main writing themes.

Key Words: themes, women creative writers, hope, despair, psychosocial dimensions, Pakistani literature.

Hope and despair are psychosocial dimensions that function as bipolar opposites. If the age old debate of whether art is for art's sake or for the greater social good were to be restated, these dimensions would take on a whole new meaning related to creative fiction. The subcontinent and Pakistan has a rich literary tradition that resonates with names of literary symbols of hope or as a prominent social voice especially in the native tongue. The poets Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz spoke both with and for the masses at critical moments in history. Others like Josh Malihabadi, Jigar Muradabadi, Akhtar Sheerani, Tabish Dehlvi, Nasir Kazmi, Jon Elia, Mustafa Zaidi, Dilawar Figar, Iftikhar Arif and Parveen Shakir, had elements of both hope and despair in their work.

Several prolific prose writers made noteworthy additions in the literary image of the new born state. Shan-ul-Haq Haqqee, Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi, Hasan Askari, Jameel Jalibi, Intizar Hussain, Akhtar Hussain Raipuri, Sibte Hassan, Sajjad Zaheer and Mushtaq Ahmed Yousufi are just a few of the prominent names. Among women writers, Qurratulain Hyder, Bano Qudsia, Khadija Mastoor, Altaf Fatima and Fatima Surayya Bajia pioneered feminist issues with realistic, and fresh characterizations. The nonnative English language cannot boast of the same richness of history, nevertheless several names surfaced in poetry including Taufiq Rafat, Alamgir Hashmi, Daud Kamal, Shahid Suhrawardy, Waqas Ahmed Khwaja and, Maki Kureishi and later M. Athar Tahir. English fiction from Pakistan gained recognition much later during the 80's, pioneered by figures like Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, Hanif Kureshi and Aamer Hussein. The males have always outnumbered the female writers in Pakistan yet recently there has been a promising increase in prominent females writers. Kamila Shamsie was shortlisted for the John Llewelyn Rhys award for her third novel, Kartography (2002); and Uzma Aslam Khan was shortlisted for the Common wealth Writers Prize (Eurasia region) for her second novel, Trespassing (2003).

The present study ventures away from history and focuses on creative publications published in the last decade, from the reader's perspective in an environmental context, as the decade has been of global socio-political importance with repercussions in the subcontinent. From the date of 9/11 leaving its indelible mark on TV viewers worldwide, to the images of the infamous Guantanamo bay area and a cataclysmic tsunami, the beginning of the 21st century has been tumultuous. On a local level in Pakistan, the decade opened with political upheavals and a military coup in 1999 which led to US sanctions, life imprisonment of the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and sweeping new powers in the hands of President Musharraf, a military offensive against suspected militants which continues to date, and the assassination of politician Benazir Bhutto. Natural disasters in the form of the worst devastation caused by an earthquake in Kashmir in 2005 and the recent floods in 2010 resulted in millions of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and additional financial crises. Though tragedies surpass socio-political positivity, untold stories of hope and courage come through the masses from the untiring volunteers at earthquake and flood relief camps to the everyday lives of workers across the country who could find the strength to dance at a Cricket World Twenty20 win in 2009. According to analyst Ahsan Butt (2009), three significant factors promoting hope in Pakistan include the explosion of the electronic media emerging with its own voice, the communication technology boom in internet and mobile technology with 1.2 million subscribers in 2002 to 88 million in 2008 and economic growth as GDP per capita increased by 60% from 2000 to 2008. This has given the educated urban middle class a medium to voice their concerns, increase their awareness and think critically. The filter down effect reaches the masses through the popular literature and dramas written by the former. It thus becomes imperative to note the emotional content and direction of the tide of the past decade in order to predict future outcomes.

Can be truly said that creative writers of this century would have been left unmoved by events of such magnitude? Could be said that these events may in turn have left no mark directly or indirectly on their personal and social lives? And carrying on from that argument, can we then say that nothing of this tumult would have been reflected in their work? History suggests otherwise. An analysis of 20th century european literature of the Post World War II period shows a greater tendency towards despair with traces of hope thrown in. However, at the turn of the 21st century the nature of despair reflects greater ambiguity for which reason many researchers have chosen to avoid the question of precedence (Fletcher, 1999 and Wisniewski, 2008).

Art and allegorical personification through the ages has traditionally allowed Hope (spes) to trample over Despair (desparatio) (Barasch, 1999). In many cases this has been portrayed through writings and by the undercurrents of hope running through the work of known cases of depression and angst in literature (Packer, 1999). Social Psychology experiments and literary insights suggest that hope is a stronger factor than despair in situations where individuals have experienced a 'rescue' situation at least once (Mack, 1999 and Mozur, 2005) and that individuals(Freud, 1961) have a tendency to lean towards hope in times of distress. Freudian and Nietzchean analysis of the sublimation of drives, particularly aggression, suggests that the pen may act as a symbol for the sword – the original drive being repressed to the point of denial or contradictory disguise, while later psychoanalysts Klein (1930) and Segal (1957) describe it as a working through of the depressive position, intuitively turning towards objects reflective of our inner hostility in order to render a wholeness at the end (Gemes, 2009).

Creative writers have usually been indicated as early readers by previous research (Piirto, 1978). Sublimation through writing is shown as a means of escaping unhappy childhood experiences (Piirto, 1992) and even childhood trauma and depression (Jamison, 1993; Piirto & Battison, 1994). A secluded work environment is preferred (Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; Miller, 1987; Piirto, 1992). Creative writers are shown to have high conceptual and verbal intelligences (Barron, 1968, 1994) and are, nonconformist, independent and self sufficient (Barron, 1968, 1969). They value self-expression and are industrious (Barron, 1968, 1972; Simonton, 1994), yet are able to take criticism.

Internationally, poetry, novels and drama have been deconstructed using existentialist frameworks for hope and hopelessness and found to be a reflection of and a reaction to Man's search for meaning and purpose in life which keeps him going. Hope and hopelessness walk hand in hand with hope leading the way, sometimes through the radical questioning of motives and at other times through the subtle interplay of doubt and desire (Frankl, 1984; Blessing and Tudico, 2005; and Fitzsimmons, 2008).

Research on women writers before the 20th century often examined role conflict and the question of identity (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). The current study is inspired by the relevant work of Jane Piirto and Etidal Osman, both researchers and creative writers. Piirto explored emerging themes in the lifespan of 80 successful contemporary women writers living in the U.S. In doing so she unearthed a total of 16 themes derived as subthemes of three main elements, developmental events, professional situations and personal attributes. Developmental events included themes of unconventional families, nurturing of talents, extensive reading, writing as auto-therapy, residence in New York City, English literature as major, and continuous high achievement. Professional situations included different occupations from parents, motherhood and career conflicts, and divorce history. Personality factors involved core attributes, depression, feeling of marginalization, tacit knowledge, spiritual overtones and incongruence between societal expectations of feminism and the self

(Piirto, 1998). Osman has focussed on notable Egyptian women writers and their use of the imagination 'to evoke, question, and transform images from the popular tradition to suggest new ways of thinking about women's psychology, intellect, and creative potential' (Osman, 1993).

Asian themes show variations of despair through the ages. Historically Urdu writers have been engrossed with two paradigms: 'the sorrows of the age and the sorrows of love' (Askari, 2004). Chinese literature throughout history has portrayed women negatively. Contemporary Chinese female writers in the last decade have gained popularity through dark 'bad girl' novels when focusing on the urban 'china doll' with greater sexual freedom while emerging themes show emphasis on the oppressed lives of rural women, their daily life stories and the negative consequences of rural to urban migration on women (Schaffer and Xianlin, 2007). Overall, the picture is one of despair. Women writers in the subcontinent have been subjected frequently to a microscopic analysis of themes related to feminism, cultural values, 'foreignness' and a clash between generations (Smith, 2010). Still, literature reviews of creative writing in the subcontinent and in Pakistan are unclear in their portrayal of predominant themes related to hope and despair.

Taking the aspect of environmental reflection and reaction as constant, the purpose of this research was to study the predominant psychosocial factor in the bipolar dimensions of hope and despair among women creative writers as shown by themes portrayed in their work and to explore if the nature of life themes of Pakistani women creative writers affects the derived psychosocial factor of hope or despair. Only female participants were considered, to control individual and cultural factors. The study aimed to reflect the full range of personal and environmental factors that could possibly lead towards a tilt in favor of hope or despair in the written expression, allowing further discussion.

Method

Sample

The sample size is of 12 female writers who were selected through purposive sampling in a two-step process. In the first step, 50 English teachers, readers and editors from an online community were randomly selected and asked to provide a list of the Pakistani fiction writers they had read during the last decade. 42 readers submitted nearly 68 entries. In the next step, common names were shortlisted and those names that did not meet the criteria, for richness of information related to the measure and control variables, were removed. In order to gain additional data, reviews and articles related to creative writing publications during the last decade were also scanned. The purposive sampling methodology thus used emphasized on a criterion based selection of information rich cases from which insight could be gained on issues fundamental to the study in the tradition of Le Compte & Preissle (1993), Merriam (1998) and Tshireletso (2002).

The following variables were used to control for individual differences within the group:

Gender: the sample consisted of female writers only Heritage: Pakistani Nationals or those of Pakistani origin currently settled abroad Population: Creative writers. Defined as imaginative writers writing poetry, fiction, plays, song lyrics, and creative nonfiction essays and books as compared to writers writing scholarly pieces, or journalists writing for newspapers and magazines (Piirto, 2010). Publication years: 2000 to 2010 Language: Initially, the study included both English and Urdu language writers but information on Urdu writers, especially related to their developmental events proved to be insufficient for analysis and their names were removed from the study.

Measures

The study was conducted from the participant – observer standpoint. The analytic induction method of constant comparison was used which is generally helpful in generating social theory. In analytic induction, data is scanned for units of phenomena and for connections, "developing working typologies and hypotheses on an examination of initial cases, and then modifying them and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases". Constant comparison is an inductive strategy looking at data, beginning with the analysis of first observations, and then undergoing "continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process" (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993). At least fifteen sources were consulted about each writer and at least two of the published works of the writer were analyzed for themes, barring those who had only one published work available during the last decade. The data obtained from publication reviews, autobiographical and biographical essays, and videotaped and published interviews were read and reread till no new themes emerged.

The qualitative data generated has been used to describe and understand the social phenomena. The following four factors were used for initial observations out of which the first three have been used earlier by Jane Piirto (1998) to categorize subthemes derived through the inductive process.

1. Developmental events: The writer's year of birth, place of birth, all relevant information about the level of education of the writer, relevant information about her parents, significant life events, marital status and information related to children was included in this section in order to obtain an overview of the lifestyle

2. Professional Situations: included relevant information about influences and the workplace.

3. Personality characteristics: included familial and environmental influences shaping the personal attributes. Derived factors were posited as one or two word adjectives about the writer's work relevant personality characteristics.

4. Main Writing themes: included a description of the genre, the writing done in the last decade and finally all the themes shown in the written work. These were then divided into subthemes of hope and despair leading to a qualitative analysis of both.

Results

Table 1 shows the emergent themes in the lives and works of the sample of 12 writers analysed for the research including the four categories mentioned in the methodology.

Table 1:

Emergent themes in the lives and works of women writers of Pakistani heritage (2000-2010)

Category	Theme Number	Theme
Developmental events	1	Birth in urban areas
	2	Primary and/or secondary education in Pakistan, higher education abroad
	3	Unconventional families, providing literary and/or supportive background for literary activities
	4	Multicultural and/or multiethnic exposure since an early age
	5	Extensive early reading, influenced by radical works portraying harsh world realities
Professional situations	6	Exposure to unsupportive socio-political atmosphere while working / writing
	7	Supportive careers in fields related to writing and/or education
Personality Characteristics	8	Writing as a means of establishing personal identity
	9	Writing as a means of challenging conventional thought and reiterating feminist ideology
Main writing themes	10	Love as a means of exploring/ establishing personal identity
	11	Oppression of women in society and need for freedom of speech, male displacement in a patriarchal society
	12	Portrayal of intense and multi-layered relationships of the protagonist with the first degree relatives
	13	Societal crisis, aesthetically distasteful image of the urban atmosphere

Table 2

Shows the names of the writers along with their analysed works.

S. No	Names	Publications
1	Maha Khan Phillips	Beautiful From This Angle (2010)
2	Bina Shah	Animal Medicine (2000), Where They Dream in Blue (2001), The 786 Cybercafé (2004), Slum Child (2010)
3	Moni Mohsin	The End of Innocence (2006), The Diary of a Social Butterfly (satire spanning 2001 to 2008)
4	Kyla Pasha	High noon and the body (2010)
5	Kamila Shamsie	Salt and Saffron (2000), Kartography (2002), Broken Verses (2005), Burnt Shadows (2009)
6	Uzma Aslam Khan	The Story of Noble Rot (2001), Trespassing (2004), The Geometry of God (2007) ,
7	Talat Abbasi	Bitter Gourd and Other Stories (2001)
8	Qaisra Shahraz Ahmad	The Holy Woman (2001), Typhoon (2003)
9	Feryal Gauhar	The Scent of Wet Earth in August (2002), No Space for Further Burials (2006)
10	Muneeza Shamsie	Neither Night Nor Day (2007), And The World Changed (2008). (inclusion of short stories by the writer in these collections)
11	Ilona Yusuf	Picture This (2001)
12	Maniza Naqvi	On Air (2000), Stay With Me (2004), A Matter of Detail (2008), Sarajevo Saturdays (2009)

Table 2: Names of women writers of Pakistani heritage and their publications (2000-2010)

Figure 1 shows the birth statistics of the writers by country wise data showing that while 67% of writers have been born in Pakistan, only 16% have been born abroad while data for another 17% is unavailable.

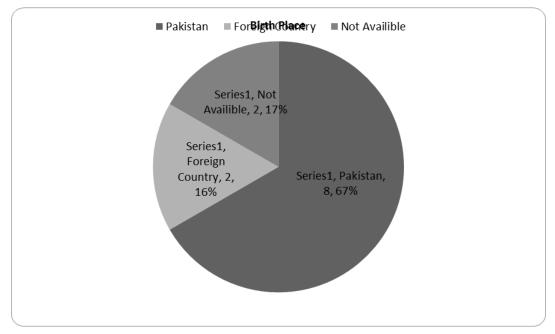Figure 1: *Percentage distribution of birthplace data*

Figure 2 shows that many more writers received higher education abroad in UK (45.45%), USA (36.36%) and Canada (9.09%) than in Pakistan (9.09%).

Figure 2: *Percentage wise distribution of higher education degrees in a global perspective.*
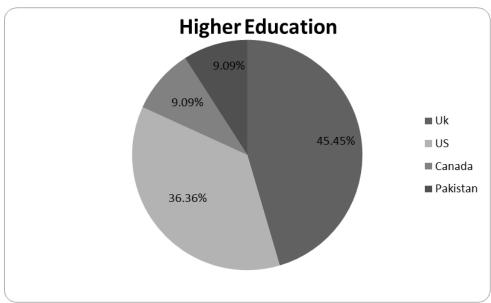

Figure 3 shows a strong element of multicultural exposure (58%) along with the combined factors of supportive family, literary background and exposure (25%) as possible themes related to a strong family unit for the writers.

Figure 3: *Percentage wise distribution of familial factors.*

Family Background

Series1. supportive family, literary background, multicultural exposure. 3. 25%

Series1. supportive family. 2. 17%

■ supportive family

■ multicultural exposure

■ supportive family, literary background, multicultural exposure

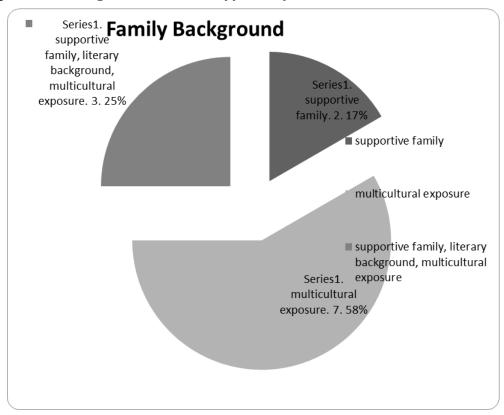Series1. multicultural exposure. 7. 58%

Figure 4 shows the division of writers according to the genre of writing, indicating a greater percentage of writers writing both short stories and novels than other genres or singular styles such as only poetry or only novels.

Figure 4: *Genre wise distribution of writers*

Genre

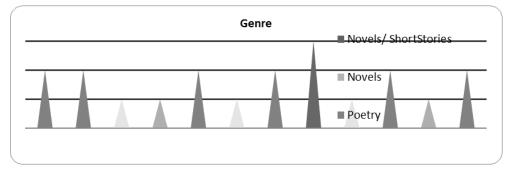■ Novels/ ShortStories

■ Novels

■ Poetry

Figure 5 and 6 show the relative values of hope and despair according to the characterization and the environmental canvas. Hope is portrayed through Independent females (67%) and toughminded, resilient characters (25%). Despair on the other hand, shows issues in the world around. Therefore, the environment is mostly seen as uncongenial (41%) and distasteful or bleak (17%) each respectively.
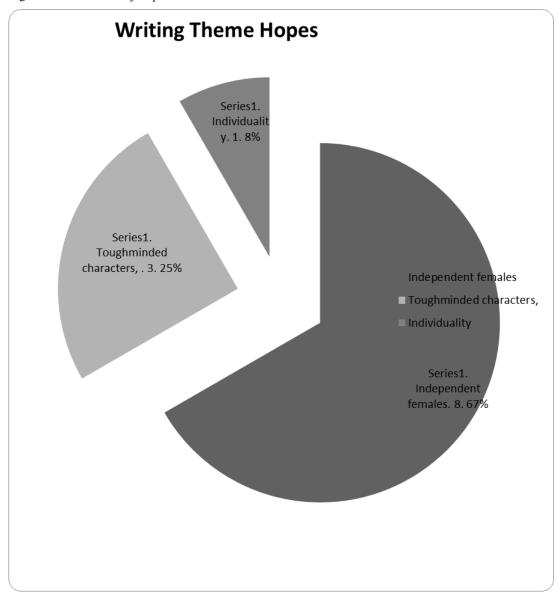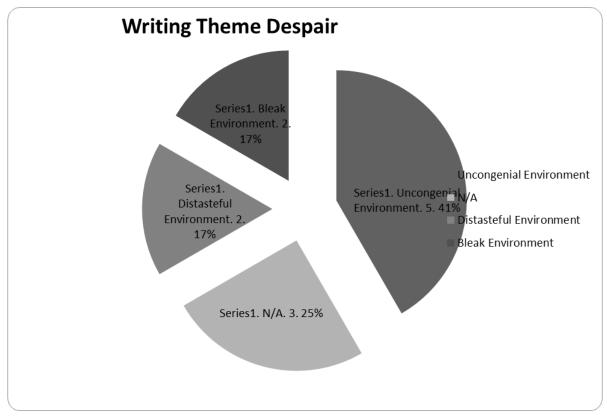
Figure 5: *Dimensions of hope*

Writing Theme Hopes

Series1.
Individualit
y. 1. 8%

Series1.
Toughminded
characters, . 3. 25%

Independent females
■ Toughminded characters,
■ Individuality

Series1.
Independent
females. 8. 67%

Figure 6: *Dimensions of despair*

Writing Theme Despair

Series1. Bleak Environment. 2. 17%	
Series1. Distasteful Environment. 2. 17%	Series1. Uncongenial Environment. 5. 41%
Series1. N/A. 3. 25%	

Legend:
- Uncongenial Environment
- N/A
- Distasteful Environment
- Bleak Environment

Discussion

The bigger picture for Pakistan during the last decade shows creative writing going global, and winning international acclaim with global geopolitics providing the inspiration for the whole (Bilgrami, 2007, Shamsie, 2007 and Sattar, 2011). Most of the data collected in the initial phase of the study yielded higher representation and information about Pakistani male rather than female creative writers, especially in Urdu literature (Islam, 2008, Memon, 2009, and Hanif, 2011), indicating that the readership and publication veered more towards male writers. In context of the geopolitical, sociocultural and psychosocial domains, it is important to note what face the relatively marginalized set of English language female writers of Pakistani heritage shows to the world. Is it one of hope or one of despair?

The results indicate a qualitative distinction within the domains of hope and despair related to the protagonist and the environment. While the environment in all the works is seen as bleak, uncongenial or even distasteful, the main protagonists, usually independent, tough-minded or resilient females, survive the odds. The ordeal may ostensibly change them but the inner core learns to adapt, mould and restructure itself to suit the outer one, while retaining its distinctness in the spiritual medium. Thus strong, independent minded female characters like the resilient Hiroko Tanaka (Burnt Shadows - Shamsie, 2009), Zarri Bano (The Holy Woman – Shahraz, 2001), and even the nine years old Laila (Slum Child, 2010) display hope in a world filled with patriarchal oppression, ethnic strife and political upheavals. The predominant psychosocial factor that emerges is that of hope through characterization which manages to dominate other despairing attributes of the environment.

The nature of life themes of women creative writers of Pakistani origin is also positively correlated with the derived psychosocial factor of hope and despair shown in their work. Their characterization of strong female protagonists in the story can probably be linked to the factor of their own life events wherein they emerged successful and triumphant over any negative influences from the world around them.

Developmental events in the lives of the writers reveal their birth in urban areas with primary and/or secondary education in Pakistan and higher education abroad. The multicultural and/or multiethnic exposure garnered in this way since an early age has impacted their work in the subthemes of rural – urban rift, portrayal of an elitist society, individual search for identity and cross cultural issues. Writers hailing from Karachi and Lahore in particular have provided illustrative metaphors using their respective cities as a backdrop for the plot of their stories. 'Karachi represented to me the essence of all that was right with Pakistan and all that could go wrong,' Maniza Naqvi expressed in an interview, while saying that the city was actually the main protagonist of her book, Mass Transit. The writers hail from unconventional families that generally provided a literary and/or supportive background for literary activities especially in the case of literary minded families such as Muneeza Shamsie and Kamila Shamsie. The portrayal of coming of age and sexuality has nevertheless been an issue for many writers like Moni Mohsin in The End of Innocence and a cause of negative comment in quite a few cases including the descriptive eroticism in Uzma Aslam Khan's novels or the earthy metaphors and imagery in Kyla Pasha's poetry.

Professional situations related to current literary skills show extensive early reading, influenced by radical works portraying harsh world realities. Mostly the works read are Western and belong to the late 19th and early 20th centuries.. Along with this, exposure to an unsupportive socio-political atmosphere while working or writing has provided the impetus for the conscious need to portray societal oppression and 'get the message across through the voices of the poor' (Gauhar – from Rumi, 2007). The writing is supported by careers in fields related to writing and/or education except for Maniza Naqvi and Talat Abbasi whose careers with International organizations are continually juggled with their writing careers. As spouses and mothers who work and write, which demands time and space of its own, balancing home life and working is often a strenuous job and needs ingenuity and adequate time management. As Qaisra Shahraz (2005) puts it, '(writing) still remains a snatched activity; a constant juggling act between my family ... and the other career. At times I envy full-time writers...'

Personality characteristics show writing as a means of establishing personal identity. Poetess Kyla Pasha exemplifies this to the hilt when talking about her initial blogging, 'starting that because I was frustrated with being divided over two continents, and divided on so many levels'. Personal issues such as the search for identity in a multicultural context, loss of a loved one or divorce are the spur for the written word as a catharsis and sublimation based act. According to Feryal Gauhar, 'Words, for me, are a balm. They soothe me when the anguish is too deep' (Rumi, 2007). Writing as a means of challenging conventional thought and reiterating feminist ideology is also seen in the '... commitment to empowering women (which) has influenced both the content ... and the genre' (Shahraz, 2005).

The main themes are steeped in the historical framework yet again of the 'sorrows of love'. Love is seen as a means of exploring or establishing personal identity. The oppression of women in society and need for freedom of speech along with male displacement in a patriarchal society can be linked to the earlier developmental events and observations made during the multiethnic and multicultural exposure, resulting in constant comparison of social mores. Hailing from mostly supportive families, the collectivistic society in the Pakistani framework can be linked to the recurrent theme of the intense and multilayered relationships

of the protagonist with the first degree relatives. The writers have grown up in a turbulent atmosphere where their 'experience, perceptions and roles... affect what (they) write about and the manner' in which the world around them is depicted (Shahraz, 2005). This has resulted in a poignant metaphor in the shape of the aesthetically distasteful image of the urban atmosphere. Their world is punctuated with unrest during General Zia's regime, 'the fallout of the 1989 Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, the three year war between the Serbians and Bosnians ... 1992 and the 2001 World Trade Tower attacks and their impact on Afghanistan' (Gauhar – from Rumi, 2007).

In the Pakistani context, then, hope emerges as a function of characterization in a world filled with despair. Ultimately hope dominates but not until it has been subjected to its share of trials demanding conscious sacrifice on a personal level. The research not only answers the questions posited in the beginning but comes up with new ones such as comparative analysis to ascertain the stability of results over gender, nationality and language. It has widespread implications for the emerging voice of writers from Pakistan as more than harbingers of doom and gloom – as harbingers of hope.

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