



## THE FEMALE PSYCHE AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN WRITING ON MY FOREHEAD: A FEMINIST PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

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### Abstract

*Literature holds a mirror to life by reflecting society and the psychological dimensions underlying human social interactions. The present study aims to examine how patriarchal structures govern women's psychological dispositions and shape feminine identity within the Pakistani socio-cultural context. The study is grounded in Nancy Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic framework, which emphasizes the role of early familial relationships—particularly the mother-daughter bond—in the psychological formation and reproduction of gendered identities. To explore the research dynamics of this proposition, the study focuses on Pakistani novel *The Writing on My Forehead* (2009) by Nafisa Haji. It investigates how feminine identity is socially constructed and how women are conditioned to conform to prescribed social and familial roles. The novel centers around Saira Qader, a strong-willed and intelligent woman who challenges her family's traditional boundaries in pursuit of independence. It further explores various phases of a woman's life, highlighting the pain, struggle, and emotional constraints experienced at each stage. By integrating social, cultural, and familial forces, the narrative reveals the complex processes through which female identity is psychologically shaped and reproduced within a patriarchal framework.*

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytic feminism, patriarchy, feminine identity.

## Introduction

Literature functions as a reflective medium, which explores life, society, and the psychology of human interaction. Psychoanalytic feminism attempts to gain understanding about the development of the psychic lives so that women's domination may be realized and eliminated. The underpinning of psychoanalytic feminism highlights the belief that men have an inherent psychological desire to subdue women. From this perception, the origin of men's impulse to dominate women and women's inconsequential struggle to suppression lies deep within the human psyche. This creates a form of domination that is integrated into society, generating and nourishing patriarchy.

The present study aims at finding out how these patriarchal orders dictate women's psychological temperament and construct feminine identity in Pakistani scenario. That is why in order to explore the research dynamics of present proposition; the researchers have selected a novel *The Writing on My Forehead* (2009) by Nafisa Haji. It aims to investigate how feminine identity is constructed and how it is socially formed and obliged to act in a specific manner, according to the social and domestic roles and regulations.

*The Writing on My Forehead* revolves around rebellious Saira Qader, who transgresses the restrictions between her family's traditions and her yearning for independence. As a free-spirited and rebellious Muslim-American of Indo-Pakistani descent, she rejects the squeezing notions of family, duty, obligation, and fate. The novelist focuses on the personal journey of a young Muslim-American, inquisitive and curious girl with strong Pakistani-Indian heritage who grows into an independent woman, struggling between tradition and modernity. Haji (2009) reflects upon the societal expectation from a woman. It might be noticed that her main aim is to depict the practices of Pakistani society where culture, norms and values are regarded as very much prestigious. As mentioned earlier that Saira is an American girl, but being a child of Pakistani parents, she is brought up according to the Pakistani norms and values. While shedding light on this phenomenon Freidan (1963) states, "Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions" (p.14). Thus, Haji (2009) has expertly presented women in different roles and behaviors. Some are outwardly rebellious; some are subjugated and oppressed by the male dominant society. The rudiments of patriarchy are also evident in the novel because the males of the novel are not only governing and suppressors of female rights, but also have their own stubbornness or decision-making power.

## Research Question

The present study addresses the following research question:  
How can psychoanalytic feminism help us understand the theme of feminine identity in *Writing on My Forehead*?

Drawing on Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic framework, the current work discovers the role of early familial relationships, particularly the mother-daughter connection, in constructing gendered identities.

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## Research Objective

This work seeks to explore the following research objective:

To explore the psychoanalytic dimensions of feminine identity in *Writing on My Forehead*.

The main emphasis is on how emotional repression and internalized patriarchal norms form the psychological development of female character. It also examines how feminine subjectivity is socially accustomed and psychologically sustained within a male dominated socio-cultural milieu.

## Significance of the Study

The present study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of feminine identity in Pakistani fiction. This study aims to provide a lens, through which, the theme of feminine identity, including the various dimensions of selfhood, subjectivity, and distinct individuality of female protagonist in Pakistani society might be well analyzed. Moreover, this research study also tries to scrutinize the core issues, which create hurdle in the way of female autonomy and liberty. Additionally, this study offers valuable direction to teachers by encouraging them to move beyond conventional boundaries, extend their scholarly engagement, and actively contribute to the growth of existing knowledge within their field.

## Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic feminism is the branch of feminism that is based on the psychoanalytic theory enunciated by Sigmund Freud. Freud, the Father of Psychoanalysis, is regarded as one of the distinguished Austrian psychologists. This genius of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has exerted, perhaps, the most momentous and far-reaching effect on each realm of human thought; especially, modern fiction came under direct influence of his psychoanalytic theories. Freud seems to bring about a tremendous revolution in literary analysis by taking reader into the dark, hidden and unknown recesses of human unconscious. Psychoanalytic feminism believes in the contribution of society to formulate gendered personality and the impact of one's experience in making his or her confidence, maturity and awareness level (Sax, 2011). For the present research, Chodorow (1978) has provided the theoretical framework. She argues that gender roles are bred psychologically, not biologically. Since women are principal caregivers, daughters identify with mothers, leading to the reproduction of femininity across generations. Thus, as she opines, gender identity is psychologically produced through early childhood attachment, particularly the mother–daughter relationship. In *Writing on My Forehead* (2009) the central character inherits emotional restraint and obedience from her mother. The mother figure becomes a cause of patriarchal continuity, instinctively transferring fear, sacrifice, and silence. Chodorow's theory explains why the protagonist struggles to isolate emotionally and assert independence.



## Research Design

The approach of inquiry with regard to the present study is qualitative in its fundamental nature. This research design, according to Yin (2010) studies the life of people according to prevalent circumstances of the real world and illustrates the perception of characters that are under study. Furthermore, Ragin (1994) describes qualitative research as an exploratory research; therefore, inductive logic is applied to examine social behavior. Jayaratne & Stewart (1995) explain that qualitative research presents an in-depth analysis of the social world because the research process allows women's lives and experiences to be addressed on their own terms.

## Literature Review

Feminism is a set of various movements that have been in quest of gender equality, targeting women's issues. Being based on the feministic movement, the aim of feminist theory is to understand the differences between male and female gender by examining social role and attitudes of a woman. According to Shahida (2005), feminism can be explained as a movement that advocates equal rights of female gender. This movement confronts patriarchy and male dominant society and attempts to make females realize their capabilities and potentials (Guba, 1981). Before 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were deprived in every field of life because they were considered timid, unreasonable and fearful. Such ideas were developed by social and cultural norms that had been predominant from centuries ago. Prasad (2006) remarks that feminists are predominantly concerned with challenging and overpowering the dominance of patriarchal systems over women and to protest against the victimization of woman in the false name of religion, culture society and morality. Angelo (1981) on female issue, laments in her poem *Woman Work* and cries that a woman's world is confined to work, more work and only work. Similarly, Freidan (1965) argues that though woman's world is limited but her work is unlimited. According to Ahmed (2009), third world women are passive victims of patriarchy. They are represented as oppressed, marginalized and powerless individuals. Jayawardena and Alwis (1996) opine that Pakistani fiction portrays gender discrimination that characterizes Pakistani society's patriarchal hegemony, in such a way, that it does not rely on sexual violence alone to keep women in check. According to Kandiyoti (1987), in the patriarchal culture like Pakistan, where women are symbol of male honour, their bodies become vested with enormous power because any disobedience on their part can bring shame and disgrace to the male members of the whole community and the family. Abraham (2011) claims that there is a general tendency in mainstream south Asian cultures to primarily construct femininity in terms of submissiveness, inferiority, self-sacrifice, nurturing good moral values, social dependency and chastity. Similarly, Singh (1991) remarks that human experience for centuries has been identical with male experience that results in the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Nahal (1991), on the other hand, defines postcolonial feminism as a "mode of existence" in which woman is a victim of the dependency syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community, or whether it is a religious or ethnic group.



## Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of *Writing on My Forehead* reveals that female identity in the novel is formed through intensely suppressed psychological processes rather than explicit social pressure. Drawing on feminist psychoanalytic theorist Chodorow, the protagonist's psyche arises as a site where parental influence, cultural beliefs, and unconscious domination overlap. The novel exhibits how the mother–daughter relationship functions as a primary mechanism for the reproduction of femininity, transferring values of emotional restriction, compliance, and self-sacrifice. These inbred psychological patterns lead the female gender to define herself relationally, highlighting domestic coherence over individual longings. It reflects Chodorow's argument that gender identity is socially and emotionally reproduced through early attachments. Haji (2009) portrays the identity construction of women from the very early childhood. The novel evidently mirrors the basic fact that girls are taught from the very early age to behave in a submissive manner. As Saira, upon remembering her childhood memories, recalls her fight with elder sister that when she disputes with Ameena, how her mother taught her to behave in a modest and submissive way. Saira reminisces that her mother also recounted the story of her cousin, whose brother poked in her eye; consequently, she lost her eye and remained unmarried throughout her life.

“Haven't I told you what happened to my cousin Laila? When she and her brother were fighting, pushing and pulling each other, over a pencil? Her brother poked her in the eye with that crushed pencil. Not because he meant to, Saira juggle boy, she always was”( Haji, 2009, p. 5).

Besides, the novelist further elucidates how Saira's mother creates her identity in her childhood. When she turns nine, her mother prepared such kind of clothes which made her different from male counterparts. “This happens, Saira. Your values and our values .... They won't always be the same. That is not an excuse to lie to us. And as long you live under our roof, you are obliged to follow our rules, to live by our values.” (Haji, 2009, p.174)

Haji (2009) also exposes the societal expectation from a woman. It might be noticed that her main purpose is to illustrate the practices of Pakistani society where culture, norms and values are viewed as very much respected. As mentioned earlier that Saira is an American girl, but being a child of Pakistani parents, she is brought up according to the Pakistani norms and values.

Moreover, repeatedly, Saira's mother (Shabana) tries to instruct such traits in her, which are accepted in Pakistani society. For instance, she advised Saira that dancing is a forbidden action in Pakistani society. It might be noticed that Shabana (Saira's mother) wants to teach her that she has to construct her personality according to the Pakistani customs and norms, which are connected with a female gender.

“Why do you have to join all these clubs Saira?..... I don't like you spending so much time there, away from home.” (Haji, p.164).



It is generally perceived in Pakistani society that when a girl becomes young, her parents, especially mothers, become very much conscious about her. For instance, when any function or ceremony is held in schools, colleges or any other place, mothers advise their daughters to behave in an appropriate manner and not to indulge in any activity, which might bring shame or create any problem for their family.

The same scenario has been depicted when Saira recalls her childhood that when she joined school clubs, how her mother reprimanded her. It might be assumed that Saira's mother wants to construct her identity according to the social customs and values. Being a female gender, she knows that a girl has to be in some restricted boundaries, and if she would cross them, she might face very horrible consequences in future.

“For Sakina's sake ...you must marry again ....Beta, Saira is here. She is not married. It is the best solution. Who else can love Sakina as her mother did? Who else but Saira?” (Haji, 2009, p.279).

The portrayal of above-mentioned lines clearly manifest the status of women in Pakistani society. It is generally observed that a girl before her marriage is bound to live according to the will of her father and brothers, after marriage, she is compelled to live in accordance with the rules and regulations of her husband and on turning old, she becomes dependent on her sons, thus remains an oppressed and weaker sex throughout her life.

“Majid khan. I was sharing a carafe of wine with Majid Khan. He wanted, he said, to know all about me” (Haji, 2009, p. 231).

Majid khan is the visiting lecturer in the school of journalism. He is a middle- aged man. When Saira first sees him, she becomes very much inspired by his looks, as she says that he has been a perfect gentleman, gallant and flirtatious. It is observed that Majid khan takes the benefit of his enticing nature and misuses Saira for his own lustful passion. The highlighted text (act of drinking wine in Majid's company) depicts that how Saira crosses all her boundaries and becomes the victim of male dominant society. Majid khan subjugates her with his flowery and embellished words. His language reflects upon his unconscious upbringing, which teaches him that female gender could be influenced very easily, as he learns that being a weak, docile and timid creature, female gender could be shaped in any manner.

“Our paths were bound to cross again and again. We were in the same profession after all” (Haji, 2009, p.259).

Of vital importance is the fact that in Pakistani society, most of the time, male gender abuses females for their own lustful passions, because female strata of society is deliberately made very weak, shy and reserved, so that she does not think to cross her limit that brings shame to her family. Even if a Pakistani girl is brought up in any foreign country, she is taught according to the Pakistani culture and tradition, as it is obvious in this particular novel as well, where Saira's mother trains her according to Pakistani culture and traditions. Apparently, the above-mentioned



lines do not seem to convey any message at first, but if the hidden meanings are analyzed, it becomes evident that Majid Khan exploits Saira many times in his life. Saira's account elucidates that being in the same profession; these limits were traversed many times. Moreover, Majid Khan is a middle-aged man; he is more intellectual and wise as compared to Saira, who is half of his age. Despite the fact that he would have stopped her to indulge in any shameful act, he does not do so because he also wants to exploit her as an object of pleasure.

"Majid Khan. I remember saying good-bye at an airport. The semester was over and so was the affair. He took me in his arms and gave me a final kiss" (Haji, 2009, p.298).

In the above excerpt from the novel, the author exemplifies that Saira and Majid's affair continues throughout a long semester. She narrates that Majid Khan's motive was to extinguish only his lustful passion with her. He does not seem serious with her, as after exploiting her when the semester ends, he simply meets her last time and goes away. He does not even bother to think for a while about his illegitimate relationship with Saira, because Saira was only an object of pleasure for him. After seeking pleasure from her, he throws her away, as a wrapper is thrown into the dustbin.

In our culture, what we do affects other people who love and care for us. It's not right to overlook other people's love and loyalty, to be selfish, instead of being mindful of what you owe them. We all have duties and obligations in life. And those duties come first, before our own selfish pleasures and whims." (Haji, 2009, p.216)

In these lines, Saira's mother attempts to instruct the importance of cultural norms and values in Saira's mind. Her main aim is to instill in her mind that her life is not for her own self, but is to be lived according to the societal demands and expectations. She teaches her that she has to lead her life selflessly, as her words represent that she wants her (Saira) to be submissive and humble. Being a woman, she holds an inferior status as compared to her male counterparts. She has no identity, individuality and self of her own, therefore, she seeks to train her in the same manner.

"They stare because they are men,' my diminutive aunt snorted with impatience, directed with equal force at me and the men around us. If you don't like it, use your dupatta to cover your head....In our culture you are defined by who you are to other people someone's daughter, wife, mother, sister, aunt With these bonds, there are expectations yes. The price you pay." (Haji, 2009, p.216)

The construction of feminine identity is clearly depicted in the above extract. It has been mentioned that when Saira goes to Karachi and visits bazaar with her family members, she faces nauseating looks of males whose eyes were like drilling holes into her dress, in an attempt to know what lay underneath them. She feels much infuriation as she says, "why do they stare they make me feel so. so dirty". The reply of her aunt clearly portrays the identity formation of female gender. She



tries to make Saira realize her status in society as being a woman she has to cast down her eyes; she has to show that she is a respectable, shy and modest girl. Further assumption might be that Saira's aunt statement is the depiction of her upbringing, in which she learnt that in every situation female has to bow down and be subjugated, submissive, silent and should never raise her voice for her rights. From the very beginning of her life, she gets the consciousness that she is born to suffer, she has no say, no life and no identity of her own and she has to live submissively throughout her life

How can we let you go so far away? Alone ? It is not right, beti, it is not right that a young woman.....an unmarried young woman.....should be so far away from her family “Keep yourself pure, Saira, and chaste, until we find you a good husband.” (Haji, 2009, p.189)

If these lines are analyzed from the researcher's perspective, it becomes clear that the author depicts the role of social practices in the formulation of feminine identity. As Saira's grandmother reminds her that when she gets an opportunity to go abroad for studies, her parents might object her decision because they know that social restrictions would not allow them to do so. Although her parents want her to get education but they could not give her permission to go abroad for higher education. The reason being clear that they are fully aware of their social norms and values. They have the notion that the society they live in, would never permit them to take such an advanced step. Besides, the main motive of Saira's grandmother while discussing with her about parents' objection, is to inculcate in her mind that female is required to live according to the social rules and regulations, as she has no will and identity of her own.

The text focuses silence, guilt, and emotional conflict as key indicators of internalized patriarchy within the female psyche. Using insights from Chodrow, the analysis illustrates that in the beginning Saira's incapability to articulate her true self is due to her marginalization from a symbolic language that corroborates female subjectivity. Sometimes silence functions as both a defense mechanism and a form of psychological inhibition, allowing survival within obstructive cultural structures while instantaneously regulating self-expression. The metaphor of “Writing” in the title signifies the impression of identity upon the female body and mind. Moreover, it also suggests that while the protagonist begins to recognize these enforced narratives, her confrontation remains largely inner. Thus, the novel portrays female emancipation as an ongoing psychological awakening rather than a radical external split, supporting feminist psychoanalytic understandings of identity construction.

### **Findings of the Study**

The current study aims to clarify the complexities of feminine identity as depicted through the characters in the renowned Pakistani novel *Writing on My Forehead* (2009). The chosen novel illustrates how female identity develops based on societal and traditional norms. By applying fundamental principles of feminism to the aforementioned novel, the researcher seeks to uncover the conventional and cultural limitations that compel women to behave in ways deemed acceptable by their society. Consequently, this research effort endeavors to provide a detailed account of the socio-cultural context that influences the formation of feminine identity.



The study is conceptualized within two interconnected dimensions. The first dimension examines how feminist critique might help us comprehend the issue of feminine identity in Pakistani fiction. The second dimension is how society shapes feminine identity and affects the actions of the female protagonist. Haji (2009) supports and promulgates the permissible and lawful confines of wedlock as the only secure mean that can give relief to a Pakistani woman. She further exhibits various social restrictions that confine, delineate and govern the lives of Pakistani women. It is also observed that passive role is assigned to women by male dominated society, making woman subordinated, marginalized and exploited, no matter to which class she belongs to either upper class, middle class or lower class, she endures many troubles, hardships to attain respect for her own self. Here it has been affirmed that female characters endure, physical, mental and emotive vehemence, because tolerance and endurance have been inculcated in them as the basic features of marital life that proposes little relief. Another important finding is sense of insecurity pertaining to female gender. Besides, it has also been revealed based on thematic analysis that female protagonist, since her childhood, was not allowed to wear her desired dresses or go to visit the places she wanted to as her parents were apprehensive that she might harm herself unintentionally after being trapped in any unpleasant circumstances. Even after having transformed into adult individual, she had an unconscious fear of insecurity with regard to her longing for better and higher education, career choice, marital lives, and uncertain future. This lack of decision-making never made her a better decision maker throughout her life. The researchers have investigated the cultural and traditional constraints that force women to behave in a way that is acceptable in their community.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The researcher recommends a more thorough examination of western feminist ideology in the future, particularly liberal and radical feminism, which are more expansive concepts that require careful consideration. It has been noted that Friedan's (1963) theories about feminine mystique have gained international recognition due to their thorough and inclusive nature of investigation; alternative conceptual perspectives on the issue in context may also aim to investigate the intricacies of recondite texts with obscure semantic contents.

Since the current study concentrated on cultural, social, and patriarchal influences on female individuality and selfhood, more research in this area may examine related topics from a variety of perspectives, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralist, new historical, and post-structuralist viewpoints.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we might state that, when examined from a feminist perspective, Pakistani fiction is the most effective means of resisting the oppression that women endure on a daily basis. As can be seen, the chosen novelist captures the predicament faced by women as they try to find their identities in the face of male-dictated standards that govern their daily existence. With female characters that either oppose or submit to their circumstances, she portrays the woman identity in all its complexity. In the chosen text, the same theme has been artistically and authentically



portrayed. However, it is important to realize that resistance in a sociocultural setting is never valued by society and that complete obedience at the expense of diminishing the genuine needs of the inner self always leads to depression and anxiety.

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