CHAPTER 5
Conclusion: A Comparative Analysis

With chains of matrimony and modesty
You can shackle my feet
The fear will still haunt you
That crippled, unable to walk
I shall continue to think.
- Kishwar Naheed (1940)
What is oppressive in our society is the linking of biological sex (female or male) to gender identity (woman or man), gender or sex role (feminine or masculine), sexual object choice (opposite), and sexual identity (heterosexual). The problem is the correlations, not the specific components. (MacCowan 299)

By these words, it is understood that these ‘correlations’ are based on psychological, social, political, cultural, racial, ethnical and religious implications. In each sphere of life, the power equation between women and men has a different connotation which subjugates the weaker sex – women. Moreover, women’s identity issues are now being addressed in literature in an effective manner in all the parts of the globe. Here, the selected female novelists writing about women show a distinct flavour in their writing. Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction* writes that “women’s fiction reflects an experience radically different from men’s because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society’s prescriptions concerning gender.” (6)

As the same sex and gender, their own perspectives and experiences play an important role in sketching their characters. Literature written by women offers a distinct flavour, keen observation in the description and stark realism with creative imagination. The selected novelists, Noor Zaheer, Tehmina Durrani and Tahmima Anam, challenge the system, challenge the status quo, challenge the stereotypical characterisation and challenge the literary canon as well. These contemporary writers put forth the view that Islamic extremism, the fanatic approach, stringently patriarchal interpretations have been promoting subjugation of Muslim women. Sheer power politics, a superiority complex and religious backing give men licentiousness to execute their regressive psyche against women in personal as well as in the political arena. Women, as usual, remain a weak target of oppression. Selected novels *My God is a Woman*, *Blasphemy* and *The Good Muslim* provide an insight into women’s lives in a specific space, time, society and culture in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively. There are substantial references claiming that these writers and their works have now become stimulators in their social, political and religious circles questioning the status quo, injustice in past and present. Through selected novels, it is clear that fictions with historical relevance and implications can create a vigorous welter among social, political and religious circles. These literary works provide a voice to the unheard, unnoticed and unobserved sagas of suffering. Their motives may
differ from one another but the basic tone and treatment of the subject describe the struggle of Muslim women from almost all perspectives and mostly from religious perspectives. Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims resemble one other and also the universal issues of Muslims’ dilemma in this globally advanced capitalist world. At the same time, contrasting views question the Islamic ideologies whereas cultural influences play a significant role in character building. “Islam and feminism” is seen as “oxymoron”, “a vexed relationship” and contrasting terms and thus it becomes a subject of importance for these writers to dig in difference relevant associations on a serious note. (Badran 1) Islamic Feminism as a theory serves a purpose to rectify certain misconceptions prevailing in religion as a patriarchal domain. Feminist reinterpretations of Quranic verses, Hadith and Sunnah, are the key-features to frame a theoretic inquiry. The gender question in Islam has been discussed by various Islamic scholars and their different approaches towards interpretations and applications of Quranic verses have added new perspectives in the existing and normative ways which are in practice. Still in the mainstream, it becomes blasphemous to question the Holy words. The scope of indulging in *ijtihad* (intellectual effort or intellectual inquiry) has been shunned. Two important reasons are legitimate to quote:

The gender question should be reexamined, as the gender revolution was intended in Islam but never took off. It was aborted arguably for two reasons: a) mainstream Islam truned royalist from the Ummayids [first ruling Islamic dynasty] onwards, and the harem developed and became more secluded as a more aristocratic version of Islam developed, and b) the doors of *ijtihad* [intellectual effort] closed and the gender revolution was thereby aborted. (qtd. in Saliba 53)

The whole idea of Islamic feminism rests on questioning with reasoning, arguments and re-interpretations. Critical analysis of stringent rules and norms has been executed by scholars in various ways.

That same inquiry has to be infused in various art forms to spread awareness establishing the fact that there must be a scope of inquiry. In the selected novels, the protagonists Safia, Heer and Maya are different from each other in different geographical environment but their assertion remains similar as they all firmly believe in and stand for equality, fight for injustice and struggle to make others contemplate
the falsity of religious bigotry created by the Islamists in their boundary. For these selected writers, it is true that

They become aware of the necessity for feminist movement because they witness or experience particular sexist and misogynist practices and their detrimental effects on women; as far as these practices determine the feminist agenda, feminists navigate within the parameters set by their culture. (Herr 151)

Noor Zaheer and Tahmina Anam seem to be more inclined towards Nationalist Feminism in comparison to Tehmina Durrani in these selected novels. Both Zaheer and Anam, having a leftist ideology, have chosen specific setting of pre-independence and post-independence era in India and Bangladesh respectively and thus they seem more vocal about Muslim women’s status in nationalist purview and with a religious identity. But at the same time, both are engaged in sketching Muslim women’s individuality through emotions, aspirations and struggles to fulfill what is true to them. Zaheer and Anam both have used real political personalities as fictional characters in their novels. In *My God is a Woman* Jawaharlal Nehru, Shah Bano and few party members are used with the same identity with realistic character sketch while in *The Good Muslim* Shaikh Mujibur Rehman and Jahanara Imam (political activist) are seen as influential characters. Both these writers have utilized real facts, incidents, data and characters to heighten the effects of their fictions. On the other hand, Durrani focuses on rural women who are so imprisoned that they even can’t imagine their roles outside their homes. Participation in National struggles is far behind from the reach of Pakistani rural women in the Pir Community in the novel. *Blasphemy* is too dark a tragedy for the readers to be able to withstand the reality behind the misdeeds of Pirs, Maulavis and religious leaders.

Safia Abbas Jafri leaves her traditional Muslim background and embraces rational, feminist and progressive stance towards her life because of her rationalist, leftist husband Abbas Jafri. On the contrary, Heer leaves her traditional Muslim background and is forced to embrace drastically fundamental and rigidly religious life with physical assaults and mental torture by her husband, religious leader and so-called messenger of Allah, Pir Sain. The case of Maya is different and contemplating that she gains proper University education with her mother Rehana’s help, embraces
leftist, revolutionary ideology and rejects the idea of marriage as an institutionalized system of women’s subjugation though she is seen with a girl child in the epilogue of the novel, but it does not reveal anything about her marriage with Joy. The incident where Joy’s mother approaches Rehana for Maya’s hand in marriage is a subtle sign of her marriage later on. But Maya is depicted as a woman of free will who makes independent decisions. The third of this trilogy may shed light on Maya’s marriage. In short, the time frame and fictional settings in these novels indicate that the younger generation intends to be more radical in thoughts and actions but the scenario is exceptionally limited with prototypes or anti-stereotypes. Partition in itself constructed hegemony and provided a milestone event in all three nations for Muslim women. Pre-independence and post-independence era in India brought out many feminists with the help of their counterparts to fight back religious fundamentalism. Pakistani rural areas after independence in 1947 have been in the grip of atrocious fundamentalism. The Pakistani movie *Khuda Ke Liye* (2007) produced and directed by Shoaib Mansoor depicts how extremism is gripping rural areas of Pakistan in recent time. Bangladesh in 1971 and after war seems more progressive in the case of Maya and Rehana. Rural areas in Bangladesh also face the same atrocities in the name of Islam as the Nazia sub-plot shows. Thus different time frames and plot setting show different dimensions of growing fanaticism. Categorically, the three protagonists present different prototypes to their time, place, culture and society. Being the most contemporary protagonist as per the novel’s time setting, young Maya sets an example of a progressive individual woman of the twenty first century. Safia Jafri after her marriage and with the help of her husband steps over a boundary, unlearns age old notions and revolts against her mother-in-law and society; whereas Heer provides the most appalling picture of women in Pir community. Even after brutal physical and mental tortures, she doesn’t throw out hope and reveals the falsity of Shrine and Pir Sain. All of them pay a big price for their voice against patriarchy. The study provides an insight that women writing about women deliver a keen picture of their emotional, psychological and ideological make-up. At the same time, the treatment to their counterparts is also intriguing. Abbas Jafri with international education in Law, barrister in profession stands out to be a feminist man of unbeatable will power who supports women around him. He openly accuses patriarchal Islamic practices in India. Not only women but also men are not allowed to go against the Holy words. Abbas’ book *The Flame* invited fatwa by the clergy asking all Muslims
to cut off ties with Abbas and forcing Safia for divorce without Iddat period. This shows a highly powerful interplay with Shariat Law by the clergies who remain conveniently chauvinist. The Fatwa declares that if Safia won’t divorce him, the same fatwa would apply on her for the crime of blasphemy against Islam and the Holy Quran.

Extremely opposite is the case with Pir Sain, Heer’s husband, who proclaims himself to be a messenger of Allah, beats his wife to death on the slightest mistakes, rapes female servants and small orphan girls, drinks profusely and does everything which is ‘haram’. He is worshipped and respected in spite of his sins. Being the supreme religious authority in the village, nobody can question his integrity. The Good Muslim presents Sohail Haque in both states of mind; liberal, revolutionary and progressively modern before independence and war while rigidly religious, conservative and patriarchal after reading and following the Holy book strictly. Sohail is presented as a counterpart to Maya’s character; instead of husband-wife duo, brother-sister pair is presented with extremely opposite traits after wartime. Maya’s lover Joy, on the other hand, is liberal and modern. It is the character of Sohail which is in constant conflict with Maya’s character. All these male characters serve a purpose in the narratives. Abbas exceptionally progressive and anti-religious, Pir Sain (pseudo)-religious and extremely authoritative while Sohail has both the strands for religion at his certain age and experiences. These novelists strive to depict society as it is and at the same time with few characters they show what the society ought to be like. Men and women together create a harmonious society and thus it is imperative to incorporate strong male characters in their fictions. In fact, in all three novels, the characterization of male-female protagonists as well as antagonists is similarly genius and exceptional.

All three novels talk about mother-daughter relationship in a unique way. What is imbibed from one generation to another is a subject to codify for the future generation. The relationships between Safia-Sitara, Heer-Guppi and Rehana-Mayamaya/Zubaida are sketched to describe the futuristic possibilities for the causes of the protagonists. Safia Jafri after Abbas’s assassination moves to Delhi, works with Amrita in a drama company, raises Sitara with hard work and passion. But “deep inside her, Safia had a nagging feeling that with each passing day, Sitara was drifting away from her. She tried to look back and analyse the past and dig out the reason for
this drift.” (Zaheer 212) The analysis is interesting as Safia thinks that “her unorthodox views were an embarrassment to her daughter who wanted to conform, to be like others. Or maybe she, in her own need for companionship, had treated Sitara too much as an equal; an equality which the child was not capable of handling, that had matured her too soon and in the direction opposite to her own.” (212) At the age of 27, Sitara pursues her PhD and gets a job, declares her wish to marry Wasim Zakaria, a Hyderabad based young Muslim boy. Later on, Wasim’s love for Shariah Law and Islam as well as his scandals of human trafficking mess up Sitara’s mentality. Safia being a democrat does not interfere in Sitara’s decisions. Zaheer writes:

Safia had never wanted to give a single religion to Sitara, but had tried her level best that she should possess a faith in humanity, goodness, truth, freedom and in the fact that nothing can last forever and has to undergo changes just so that it can survive. Religion was no different. Safia had thought that a person should be taught the scriptures only when they could comprehend and rationalize… In her desire to belong, Sitara had chosen to belong to Wasim rather than to her… Had not she herself decided to belong to the ideals of her man rather than her family? (215)

Sitara, by the end of the story realizes her mistake and accepts the cause her parents fought for throughout their lives. In Blasphemy Heer saves her daughter Guppi from her husband Pir Sain, from incest and from rape. Heer has a unique bond with Guppi as she tries to give her own dreams to Guppi but Guppi says: “I don’t want to fight against my life.” (Durrani 109) Unlike Diya and Munni, younger daughters, Heer is closer to this eldest girl child Guppi. At the age of fourteen, her marriage is fixed with a cousin. Guppi, more mature than her age, replies on her wedding day: “Amma, don’t worry about me. My life will not be worse than yours and I am used to the way things are here… I’ll explore the whole world. Easily I’ll escape my husband’s haveli and travel.” (126) After marriage and delivering a baby boy, she asserts: “My world is too dark to grow in but not dark enough to die in.” (139). Guppi or the other daughters do not resist or oppose their scenario of oppression. They simply accept their fates and remain suppressed. In A Golden Age, Rehana’s perspectives as a mother are shown wherein she struggles to get hold of her children from the custody of her
husband’s brother. After her husband’s death, the childless brother of her husband accuses her of irreligious bringing up of her children. The children were sent to Pakistan and her struggle to get them back is a very important part of the first novel by Anam. She changes her point of view from mother to daughter in *A Good Muslim*. Maya, a rebellious daughter, is atheist, practical, anti-sentimental and a medical doctor by profession. The tussle between the mother and daughter is all about belief and non-belief. Though Rehana is not a religious extremist, she suggests to Maya to start praying, to start believing and to start reading holy words as to avoid being alienated. After seven years’ exile, Maya’s reunion with her mother is a special occasion in the novel. Their bond is uniquely described. During freedom movements, at rehabilitation centers and afterwards, both of them work together harmoniously. During her illness, Rehana does not lose hope as Maya always serves her as a daughter first and a doctor later. In the epilogue Maya is seen with her own five years old daughter Zubaida who carries her traits attending rebellious protests. Religion affects personal relationships here in very distinct ways. The mother-daughter relationship also gets affected by the presence of religious debates and practices. These novelists suggest that religious practices affect not only social, political and cultural existence but also personal lives and relationships.

Zaheer, Durrani and Anam, being contemporary progressive writers, deliberately focus on women’s subjugation to push forward a debate on patriarchal interjection in religion, laws and social lives. Islam with multilayered interpretations, inter-conflicting ideologies within different sects and belief systems has blocked the ways for equity and equal chances for women in these novels. A sense of adherence to Quranic preaching without having any contextual relevance to contemporary world has been leading the mass towards a sightless, hegemonic and suppressing belief system. Their voices of dissent are curbed and controlled by growing fanaticism. Islamic feminism as a theoretical weapon helps Muslim women to claim for their rights in Islamic paradigm without being tagged anti-religious, modern, westerners or out-casted sluts. Issues like Triple Talaq, Mahar, veiling, female education, marriage, abortion, domestic violence, rapes, physical assaults on female slaves etc. are raised to be answered in the light of Islamic preaching. The popular practices, the usual reaction towards the issues, patriarchal interpretations and age-old exegesis are explained with different incidents in the selected novels which show that these writers
are raising questions, citing Islamic treatises along with keeping a room for further open dialogue among the followers of Islam. For an instance, Zaheer through her spokesperson Safia, writes in her journal in *My God is a Woman*

Islam accepts marriage as a contract and not something that heavens arrange. It is but natural that there would be instructions about the dissolving of this contract. In Ayats 241 and 242 of the Quran, the question of maintenance is answered: “WA LIL MOTALLAQATAY MATA UN BIL MAAROFAY HAQQAN ALAL MUTTAQUEENA” ‘For divorced women maintenance/provision is a reasonable scale. This is the duty on the righteous.’ “KAZALEKA YUBAIYYANULLAHO LAKUM AYATEHEE LA ALLAKUM TAELEOON” ‘Thus doth God make his sign to you, in order that you may understand.’ (From the Holy Quran by Yusuf Ali, Page 96) (272-273)

Safia aggressively illustrates her grief over Shah Bano’s controversy and points out that “according to them [Muslim fundamentalists], no judge is qualified to interpret the Holy Book, only a maulvi, often little more than literate has the right to interpret the Quran.” (Zaheer 273) The fiction with real issues and real instances from the Quran is strikingly impressive to understand the grave subject of Quranic exegesis. In the same way, Durrani also incorporates the details through Heer’s working knowledge of Islam as a rural and deprived woman. It is significant what Heer says: “it had reduced Islam to fit into the palms of pygmies. They played with it like putty. Middlemen and salesmen had converted Muslims into grave worshippers. They led us back to the time of *jahalia*, back to the conditions our Prophet had freed us from, back to the very reasons that had called for Islam.” (Durrani 103) She furthermore talks to herself with regard to Guppi that:

If our Holy Book was understood, it would cause an uprising. Its content was dangerous. It exposed those who exploited it. The translation could make a revolution. But it was not good for Guppi to be involved in these matters and I said nothing. (105)

It is necessary to understand the roles of these women characters in different nations, cultures, time, background and societies in the context of Islam as a religion. Anam,
too tries to assert with the help of Sohail on few occasions and Rehana that: “It’s only
religion” (Anam 129). Through this, it is meant that it is a way of living life, it is not
harmful. Their religion, Islam is a guideline to believe in and follow for a peaceful
and just life. “Just because it was usurped for evil ends doesn’t make it a bad thing.”
(128) The misconception about religion is addressed by Rehana and Sohail to Maya.
These writers incorporate different ideas through their fictional characters to be
understood in mainstream common mass. They use different references in different
circumstances to spread awareness among readers. The struggles they show are not
different from what common Muslims suffer from. And thus, the literature about
dissent voices through prototype characters is the need of the hour as it serves to be
the important backbone for social change. It can be asserted that the application of
Islamic feminism as a discourse in social sciences and literature provide readers a
better understanding of the religious vision of Muslim women’s rights which would help
to create better and balanced societies for Muslim women in future.
Works Cited


