



Gendered Guilt: Scapegoatization and Feminine Experience in South Asian Literature

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ABSTRACT

The current research paper discusses the role of female characters in the South Asian literature works based on the theory of scapegoatization of René Girard. The theory by Girard states that the collective aggression and guilt of a society is often transferred onto a chosen scapegoat, is applied, to analyse how in South Asian literature, women are often selected as the bearers of the family and communal guilt. This paper discusses the influence of cultural and historical contexts on the construction of narratives of women as scapegoats and examines a range of South Asian Literature works. The paper discusses how these individuals are recognized, alienated, and ultimately murdered to achieve peace in the society. These literary manifestations are analyzed according to the feminist approach, which assists the research in finding the common themes represented and patterns which either reinforce or refute the patriarchal norms. To add to bigger discussions on gender, power and literary representation the study tries to provide a meaningful insight into the development of the Girardian theory of the scapegoat in the South Asian context. This work shows that gendered scapegoatization plays a very important role in fictional discourses as well as real-world gender relations in South Asia by focusing on the intersection of literary and social theory analysis.

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1. Introduction

The concept of scapegoatization by René Girard provides a valuable way of understanding how societies redirect blame and general violence onto specific individuals or groups of people. This theory brings out a very important gender aspect of the South Asian literature context, where women characters are commonly depicted as scapegoats bearing the blow of moral failure and social guilt. In an elaborate analysis of some South Asian writings, this paper, attempts to explore this connection between gender, guilt and literary representation. A massive body of South Asian literature that encapsulates the profound social dynamics in South Asia has been created. The region is also diverse and full of interesting historical stories. Women often become the focal element of these literary texts, as they transfer all the concerns and unresolved problems of the community to the female characters. These are not just real people, these female characters are also symbolic containers that carry the burden of social expectations and shame. Girard states that scapegoatization involves channeling the hatred of the group toward an innocent target in a bid to restore peace and order within the group. This is often gendered around South Asian literature with women being more likely to be the scapegoat than men. In this research paper, contemporary writings are analysed with an attempt to establish how the scapegoating of women is perpetuated by South Asian literature. The feminist literary criticism and theory presented by Girard are introduced into the study in an attempt to determine the unseen motives and motifs behind these narratives. The discussion focuses on how societal,

religious and cultural norms reinforce the production of female scapegoats and how such representations bear implications on understanding gender relationships in South Asia. The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the multifaceted relationship between social norms and literary representation. In particular, it promotes critical rethinking of the role of South Asian literature in reproducing patriarchal hierarchies through female characters as scapegoats. The work contributes to a better understanding of the gendered elements of scapegoatization in South Asian cultural settings, where more balanced representations of women in literature are needed to be created with an adequate analysis of these stories.

1.1. Problem Statements

Women are often scapegoats in South Asian literature, and there is a problematic tendency in narrative where women bear a disproportionate blame and shame on their society. Such gendered narratives are created and reproduced by the cultural, theological, and social context within which this literary phenomenon is deeply embedded. This is a widespread problem, but very little research has investigated the specific narrative processes and how contextual conditions influence the development of female scapegoats. Moreover, since these literary representations mirror and even strengthen cultural perceptions of women, they affect the gender processes in the real world to a significant degree and are part of the more general issue of gender inequality. To counter the impact of these representations on literature and culture, one needs to make sense of them and subject them to critical analysis. To resolve the problem of the impact of these representations on literature and society, it is vital to understand them and critically interpret them. This highlights the importance of having more balanced representations of female characters in South Asian cultural stories.

1.2. Research Questions

1. Which social, cultural and religious factors influence the development and reproduction of the victim position assigned to women in South Asian literature?
2. What are the effects and reflections of these literary manifestations of female scapegoats on gender processes in the real world, as well as on the experiences of women in South Asian practice?

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To examine the social, cultural and religious contexts in which scapegoating women is endorsed in South Asian literature, and how these various cultures generate and sustain the gendered discourses of blame and guilt.
2. To assess the impact of these literary representations on gender relationships in reality, it would be important to explore how the scapegoat status allocated to female characters influences and determines the lives and perceptions of women in South Asia.

1.4. Significance

This is significant as it is a critical work that considers the ways in which South Asian literature has employed female characters as scapegoats to explain as well as propagate gender inequalities in society. This study is an exploration of the cultural, theological, and sociological factors that underpin the narrative processes that portray women as the carriers of guilt in the society by applying the scapegoat theory developed by Rene Girard using a feminist approach. This work is crucial to understanding the ways in which gender relations are both represented and constructed by literature, giving us a clue as to the omnipresence of gendered blame and its implications. Finally, the article contributes to wider discourses on gender equality and literary representation, by forming a plausible sense of what role women play in South Asian Literature.

2. Literature Review

The multidimensional problem of scapegoating the female characters in South Asian literature interact with a number of academic paradigms, such as the feminist literary criticism, as well as the theory of scapegoating, which belongs to Rene Girard. Informed by diverse texts, as well as critical analysis, this literature research examines these constructs and reflects on the relationship between them and the treatment of women in South Asian literature. René Girard in his thesis of scapegoating, first developed in his 1972 manuscript, *Violence and the Sacred*, concludes that scapegoating is a common practice among civilizations in their attempts to project collective blame and violence onto a chosen target to alleviate internal tensions. This is a scapegoat, in most cases, an individual or group perceived to be different, on whom the entire collective guilt is then projected so that the society can temporarily revert back to harmony. The

methodology that Girard provides is a valuable way to think about scapegoating in literature, especially in South Asian literature. The investigation of feminist literary criticism also examines how the role of gender, and the standards of patriarchal society are maintained and disturbed in literature. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and other people studied in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) the way women in literature are often limited to degrading roles that reflect the social biases of the society. Applying such a perspective to South Asian literature, one will realize how often female characters are scapegoated, as such practices are supported on a bigger patriarchal scale (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020).

Also, due to its rich diversity, South Asian literature tends to make women scapegoats and bear the responsibility of moral failures and group disgrace. The motif is very frequent in both classical and modern fiction, as well as in ancient and modern history. To illustrate, Classical literature such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* do contain female characters playing the roles of the victim or foil. Sita is a good example of such in the *Ramayana*. Due to the doubts of the society concerning her chastity she undergoes a trial by fire and is finally expelled despite her undying faithfulness. Within her 2000 book, *Questioning Ramayanas*, Paula Richman reveals how the Sita narrative is appropriated as a scapegoat to many social issues about female virtue and purity by reflecting and legitimizing patriarchal ideologies. Draupadi is a complex character in the *Mahabharata* that also sees himself as a scapegoat. An example of how female characters are commonly forced to bear the brunt of family feuds and community disgrace could be her humiliation in the Kaurava court and subsequent trials. In his 2001 work *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, Alf Hiltebeitel provides an analysis of the story of Draupadi to draw conclusions about gender roles and the mechanisms of power in pre-historical India. Other than that, in 1997, Arundhati Roy wrote the novel, *The God of Small Things*, in which the scapegoating of women is also examined, especially through the character of Ammu, who becomes the girlfriend of a lower caste guy, which causes her to be rejected and eventually lose her life. The story of Roy is a denunciation of the stereotypes of gender and caste which automatically subject the woman to social criticism and punishment. We see in the analysis of Anna Clarke in *The Vulnerability of Women* in Arundhati Roy *The God of Small Things* (2002) how the narrative of Ammu also represents broader issues of scapegoating and marginalization (Roy, 1997).

Furthermore, South Asian cultural and religious backgrounds also play an important role in shaping the scapegoating discourses of female characters. Women are often stereotyped as family honor and social moral guardians in Islamic cultures, Hindu mythology and even local cultural practices and are therefore easy to scapegoat. In *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia* (1997), Leela Dube discusses how religious attitudes and kinship connections affirm the subordination of women by acting as scapegoats. Critical studies have also examined how the stories themselves and the process of their telling reinforce and reflect gendered scapegoating. Kumkum Sangari and Vaid (1989) in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* discuss traditional gender norms in terms of their being challenged and upheld within literature of the colonial and postcolonial eras. Although certain modern authors dismiss the concept of scapegoating women, they argue that other writers unwittingly perpetuate such stereotypes because they fail to completely avoid the paradigms of patriarchy. In conclusion, one can state that the phenomenon of scapegoatization of female characters in South Asian literature is a complex issue that is combined with cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors. Using the scapegoat theory of Girard and the feminist criticism of literature, this review has highlighted how women are depicted in the ancient and the modern works as the origin of shame and blame in the society. This is made very clear by such pictures that more equal and more detailed literary imagery of women is necessary because they not only represent, but also support larger masses of patriarchal action. Future studies of such exchanges also can contribute to the existing body of knowledge about gender and power in South Asian literature.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper assumes two theoretical perspectives: the feminist literary criticism and the theory of scapegoating by René Girard. Such theories can be useful in analyzing the phenomena of South Asian female literary characters as scapegoats.

3.1. Theory of Scapegoating by René Girard

The thesis of René Girard states that it is common in civilizations to release the tensions and conflicts within them by means of collectively acting to transfer their anger and guilt to a chosen scapegoat. Collective guilt is directed at this scapegoat who typically is a person or group perceived as different or abnormal so that the society can temporarily restore a sense of harmony and wholeness. Girard in his writings and, more particularly, in the book *Violence and the Sacred*, provides a conceptual framework through which one can understand how the scapegoating mechanism operates in the story. The thesis proposed by Girard helps to understand the way women characters often become the scapegoat in South Asian literature that bears social disgrace and moral flaws. By examining how scapegoating is executed in these stories, this framework helps us understand the psychological, social and cultural mechanisms. The mechanisms of the scapegoating operation underlie the scapegoating of women in South Asian literature and the analysis of how the scapegoating of women is used in South Asian literary works offers insights into culture, social and psychological reasons behind scapegoating of women in South Asian literary works.

3.2. Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism offers a critical perspective on the representation of women in literature, and it investigates how literary texts reproduce or challenge gender roles and patriarchal norms. This paradigm is focusing on feminine characters tend to be limited to inferior roles that promote discrimination, and social conventions. This paradigm provides a prism through which to analyze how South Asian works of literature blame its female characters through the lens of significant feminist theorists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* explores female portrayals in literature. Feminist literary criticism addresses how these stories produce and reproduce gendered power relations and illuminates the greater importance of scapegoating to understand gender inequality and women agency in literature.

3.3. Meet of Theoretical Frameworks

The scapegoating theory and feminist literary criticism of Girard combine forces to present an in-depth approach to studying how the female characters in South Asian literature are scapegoat-ed. This study tries to explore the cultural dynamics and the processes behind the scapegoat use of women in literature by combining these two perspectives. In addition to helping to understand how gendered scapegoating works in the contexts of South Asian literature, this theoretical approach underscores the more general importance of this scapegoating to understand power, agency, and representation in literature and society, in general. The theoretical framework described above presents a good point of departure to examine the role of the South Asian female characters as a scapegoat. This framework offers an insight into the complex dynamics between cultural, social, and psychological factors which shape the representation of women as scapegoats in literature through the application of feminist literary criticism and the theory of scapegoating described by René Girard. It is in this light that this paper aims to help advance our knowledge on the dynamics of gender, power structures, and representation within South Asian literature. It also highlights the general applicability of the scapegoatization concept to the interpretation of the topic of gender inequality and agency of women in literature and society.

3.4. Methodology

Multi-layered analysis comprising the textual analysis and critical interpretation is the study methodology which will be used in this paper. The objective is to examine critically in detail the scapegoatization of female characters in South Asian literature, with reference to a wide variety of textual and critical approaches.

3.5. Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is the main part of the present study, and it involves scapegoating of women in literature works and critical readings of them. In selecting these texts, the cultural importance will be considered, the relevance of the theme, and the ability of such texts to describe gender relations. Significant literature by various authors is selected, and to identify themes, patterns and narrative strategies related to the scapegoating of women, they are analyzed in a systematic manner. Critical interpretation is a key element of this research as the text data are analyzed and interpreted with the help of theoretical frameworks: feminist literary criticism and the theory of scapegoating by Renne Girard. The two theoretical frameworks above

provide useful analytical tools to understand the socio-cultural processes that support exploitation of women as scapegoats in the South Asian literature. This paper explores how scapegoating narratives impact on the representation of gender, relations of power and cultural perception of women through critical interpretation.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Text 1: Ice Candy Man

Girard in his thesis argues that mimetic desire where individuals imitate the desires of each other tends to lead to human conflict through sparking competition and violence. This violence is then brought to an end through the scapegoating method whereby a community transfers its shared aggressiveness and guilt to a chosen victim who is then killed to help reinstate order. The rising conflicts of Partition in the novel *Ice Candy Man* increasingly dismantle the social order that once dominated Lenny at home and in his neighborhood. Because of her beauty and charm, Ayah attracts the attention of a number of men who follow different religions. The attraction of each man to Ayah is increased relative to the others, so that the attraction of each is not individual, but mimetic. As stated in the text, "Everybody is in love with Ayah. Everybody. The butcher, the gardener, the Sikh zoo attendant, the Faletti's Hotel cook, the Government House peon, the Chinese dentist and the Pathan. Our Punjabi chowkidar and even the beggar who sweeps our courtyard and refuses the tea my mother sends out." (Sidhwa, 1989). This forms the basis of mimetic rivalry as it enlightens about the common desire of the various men towards Ayah. Worsening this contest is the mounting suspicion and enmity within the community as Partition draws near. This also highlights the attraction of men to Ayah, which marks the beginning of mimetic rivalry since each man is more attracted to her as the others focus on her. To reestablish social order, Girard relies on scapegoating process, which implies selecting a victim to assume the overall responsibility of guilt and violence of the group. Against a backdrop of rising sectarian violence, Ayah, a Hindu woman in a predominantly Muslim area is an easy scapegoat. As it is stated in the text, "The men burst into the room. ... They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, their bulging eyes fastened on her terrified face." (Sidhwa 182) In this case, Ayah is forcibly kidnapped by people who are driven by hate within the society, a fact that shows that she is the scapegoat.

According to Girard, the sacrificial crisis occurs when the processes of the social systems fail and undifferentiated violence is produced. Ayah is an example of this dilemma because she was kidnapped and converted against her will and married to Ice Candy Man. Her misery is a vehicle of repentance on the behalf of sins of many people and reinstatement of law and order. As mentioned in the text "She was my precious Ayah, and they tore her away from me. They trampled her tender soul under their feet, and left her there, like a wounded animal." (Sidhwa 223) As Ayah is dehumanized and expected to lie down, she becomes a fully-fledged scapegoat, meaning that the community has to get somebody to bear the burden of its mutual aggression. The gendered element of the scapegoatization of Ayah also highlights the gendered nature of the theory of Girard, which is that in moments of crisis women are often the victims of extreme measures of control and violence. The manner in which Ice Candy Man exploited her illustrates how the body of women is weaponized in order to establish control. "He is not just Ice Candy Man now. He is my lord and master. He is my tormentor." (Sidhwa 240) This quote helps emphasize the connection between scapegoating and gender, which involves the helplessness of Ayah and her loss of agency. Ayah is a very influential person in Lenny because it was not only the loss of her innocence, but also the terrible truth about communal violence. Another significant detail in the coming-of-age story of Ayah is when Lenny learns that she has been victimized. "Through Ayah's desecration, I learnt that there was nothing sacred or inviolable in the world." (Sidhwa 260) Ayah loses her innocence due to the confession of Lenny about her pain which made her aware of the sadistic relationship of the scapegoat and mimetic desire. The scapegoatizing of Ayah in the *Ice Candy Man* can be approached as a complex play of mimetic desire, competition among communities, and sacrificial violence through the lens of the paradigm of Renne Girard. Ayah becomes a victim of group enmity. Her horrible fate and the great power she exerted on Lenny emphasize the devastating effects of unmitigated mimetic competition and the need of sacrificed victims to ensure order in times of crisis. Following the thoughts of Girard on both violence and the scapegoating process, Sidhwa offers a powerful insight into the human price of community hate and the loss of innocence through the story of Ayah.

Text 2: In Name of Honour: A Memoir

In the framework of the philosophy of Renne Girard, the work *In the Name of Honour* by Mukhtar Mai presents an inspiring story about scapegoating. The sacrificial crises, the scapegoat system, and mimetic desire, all inspired by Girard are key to understanding the social dynamics in play within the horrifying real story of Mukhtar Mai. The book explains how Mai was traumatized and how she later sought revenge by fighting against her gangrape to avenge her brother who had supposedly misbehaved. Girard explains in his theory of mimetic desire that individuals often imitate the desires of others which generate competition and rivalry. In the case of Mai, the perceived hierarchy of the Mastoi and Gujar tribes and their honor are the origin of the social conflict. The members of the Mastoi tribe share this mimetic desire to preserve tribal honor and power, which becomes a kind of group revenge. The Mastoi had always had a sense of superiority over the Gujar and now they felt that their dignity had been tarnished. "The Mastoi had always believed themselves superior to the Gujar, and now they felt their honor had been sullied." (Mai 42) The above quotation shows the collective need of the Mastoi tribe to defend their honor leads to conflict and ultimately to the scapegoat status of Mukhtar Mai (Mai & Cuny, 2006).

On the one hand, Girard asserts that a group of people often needs to find a scapegoat to whom they transfer the overall aggressiveness and guilt as a means of solving internal issues. The Mastoi tribe makes Mukhtar Mai a scapegoat, whose transgression they use to restore their lost dignity and their village to social order. They concluded that they would revenge the perceived humiliation they suffered at the hands of Shakur and do so by punishing his sister. "They decided that to avenge the supposed dishonor brought upon them by Shakur, they would punish his sister." (Mai 47) According to them, community needs to punish Mukhtar Mai because they want to find someone to bear the burden of the group anger and frustration, hence their acceptance of the scapegoat. Girard says that the sacrificial crisis is a social disorder that brings about divisions in the society to be confused and uncontrolled violence to prevail. These social boundaries along with the violence of order through victimhood that the Mastoi tribe decides to gang-rape Mukhtar Mai are an act of extreme violence. "As the Mastoi men dragged me into the room, I knew that my fate was sealed. I was to be sacrificed for the honor of the tribe." (Mai 55) Besides being a sin that he personally committed, the rape of Mukhtar Mai is also symbolic crime meant to make her suffer in order to restore the supposed social order and hierarchy. The scapegoating of Mukhtar Mai is also largely gender related. As the bearers of family and societal reputation in a patriarchal society, women are often the most obvious targets of revenge and retaliation. The abuse of Mai as a woman is a loud reminder of how patriarchal society employs the body of women to control and dominate. "In our village, a woman's body is often used as the battlefield where men fight their wars of honor." (Mai 63) This statement raises the gendered nature of scapegoating where women are disproportionately the victims in their bid to uphold social norms that are dictated by males. The story of Mukhtar Mai explains the consequences of scapegoating when it comes to the entire society. Her bold action to fight and avenge also compromises the dignified and old traditions of revenge, loss of innocence and awareness that something formative must be altered. "By speaking out, I hoped to break the cycle of violence and shame that had trapped so many women before me." (Mai 132) Mai breaks the scapegoating cycle by revealing the deep-seated injustices and making people lose their grip on the social norms of honor and justice.

Text 3: Sand in the Castle

The theory of mimetic desire by Rene Girard states that individuals imitate the desires of other individuals and this often leads to competition and conflict. In *Burka* a short story, people are motivated to follow such ideals because the society requires women to behave in a certain way and honor them. Once these norms are believed to be violated, the community reflects and supports this need creating an atmosphere that is prepared to face a conflict. To bring back social peace, the group transfers its group guilt and frustrations into a chosen victim through the Girardian mechanism of scapegoating. In *Burka*, the teenager girl plays the role of the surrogate of the interests of the people regarding religious decency and dignity. The community feels like it has to punish her because of her activities which they consider as deviant in order to strengthen their ideals. The girl is forced to bear the weight of the group wishing to honorably do what is right, which is a scapegoating technique because the community opts to assault her due to her perceived indiscretion. *Burka* is a short story, by Syrrina Haque, which presents the real picture of a society, in which women are undermined, oppressed, and subdued by men. *Burka* is an account of thirteen year old girl Gulbano, who has been deprived of the fundamental rights like

education, freedom of speech and expression, most importantly her freedom to live her life according to her need and desire, hence her circumstances force her to run out of her house, to escape getting married to a fifty year old man, yet her good fortune is worse than she could ever imagine it, because the cost she is paying is her precious life, the cost she is paying is her freedom, freedom of religion, freedom of burka, freedom of men and freedom of a father, who is Gulbano has been coerced into marriage with a man fifty years old. She and her mother spend the entire night crying and sobbing because they are not able to utter a word in defense of their rights. Gulbano is killed under the banner of religion and honour because she eloped out of her house to escape the marriage. The writer condemns this by saying in the final paragraph of the story that evil has avoided and good has triumphed in this situation. Haque says "The crowd dispersed. The show was over, and it was time to go about their business. The evil was shunned; good had prevailed. In the middle of the town square lay a bundle, a humped bundle, red crimson... and very still just a mass of burka"(Haque, 2010).

When the social order breaks down, as Girard puts it, the consequences will be undifferentiated violence which will be redressed by sacrificing a scapegoat. It is called a sacrificial crisis. Besides the fact that the punishment the girl received is a personal form of revenge, the penalty is also a ritual sacrifice aimed at maintaining moral and religious values of the community and restoring communal peace. The torture of the girl is to be a public demonstration of violence, to underline the selfless element of her punishment and commitment of the community to its values. This thesis of Girard is also applicable to gender relations, which often raise women as the targets of blame in patriarchal societies. The punishment the girl receives in *Burka* is also an outcome of the gender conventions that are so entrenched that they have in place disproportionate pressures on women to uphold honor at home and at the community level. Applying the theoretical framework of René Girard to the short story, *Burka*, one can argue that the short story offers a powerful analysis of scapegoatization. The text demonstrates the functioning of the sacrificial dilemma, the scapegoating mechanism and mimetic desire within the narrative. The fact that the teenage girl is victimized brings up the destructive aspect of these systems, particularly the expectations of patriarchy and gender views. Her death is also supposed to be an appeal to social thought and change and denunciation of these tyrannical structures.

Texr 4: Are You Enjoying?

Another short story written by Mira Sethi is titled *A Life of Its Own*, and it talks about two women who both fight a patriarchal order. Other serious issues, including family honour, are also discussed in the short story. To avenge the honour of a family person, a girl is being beaten. Farah and ZB attempt to save the girl who is carried about naked to save the honour of the family. It is also a reflection when the male member of a family has been accused of adultery, and to avenge the female member of the family, she has been sexually oppressed. As mentioned in the story "A girl, a teenager of about fourteen, was being paraded naked on a street, urged forward by a man wielding a stick. A circle of men surrounded her. Her hands were strewn over her face, and she was wailing, begging for someone to rescue her" (Sethi, 2021).

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper examines the complicated interplay that exists between scapegoating, gendered guilt and the female experience in South Asian literature. Using the concept of scapegoatization by René Girard as a theoretical framework, the study explores how women have become scapegoats and blamed as the cause of the acts committed by the entire family, as well as society. Through a literary analysis the study helps us to see how women are sidelined, identified and ultimately sacrificed towards attaining peace in the society. By using a feminist approach, the paper explores these interpretations and concludes that patriarchal norms are undermined and reinforced in both real-life and fiction South Asian gender relationships. The analysis adds to larger discussions of gender, power, and representation by indicating where social theory intersects with literary analysis. It also offers very enlightening details of the various ways that literature not only mirrors but also transforms the structures and attitudes of society.

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