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Masculinity in Crisis and Pakhtunwali in Zaitoon Bano's English-Translated Works

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Keywords

Gender, Honour, Masculinity in Crisis, Pakhtunwali, Translation, Zaitoon Bano.

Abstract

This article examines the representation of masculinity in crisis in the three English-translated stories by Zaitoon Bano—The Gambler (trans. Masror Hausen, 2002), The Luckiest (trans. Nida Shafi, 2006), and The Straw Bridge (trans. Sher Zaman Taizi, 2007) - all published in the Pakistan Academy of Letters through close textual analysis grounded in R. W. Connell's theory of masculinity in crisis and the cultural framework of Pakhtunwali. Following Connell's (1995) idea that masculinity is a socially formed regime of practices, which have been shaped by power relations and institutional structures, the study explores the ways in which the male characters of Bano, as well as the patriarchal regimes that they inhabit, are made morally unstable, emotionally repressed and socially contradictory. Special interest is given to how the key values of Pakhtunwali, nang (honour), ghairat (courage) and badal (revenge) operate not as the agents of male dominance but as the agents of their own destruction. This set of values, rather than reinforcing male authority, creates internal conflict, social alienation and ultimately the psychological integration of the male ego. The analysis reveals that Bano, as a female author within a profoundly patriarchal literary tradition, employs narrative technique, characterization, and symbolic detail to expose the emotional and ethical costs of hegemonic masculinity in Pakhtun society. Her work constitutes a subversive space, critiquing the dominant norms of male identity and conduct within Pakhtun culture. The study further reasons that English translation extends Bano's critical involvement into a transnational academic field, making locally specific gender formations available to global theoretical discourse. The results are used in the study of masculinity, Pashto literary criticism and translation studies, making the work of Bano an important and understudied piece.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years of her writing, Bano created a body of work that was able to consistently challenge the patriarchal framework of Pakhtun society, not just exposing the oppressed women but also revealing the moral hypocrisy and emotional suppressions that patriarchy practices upon men. What makes her stories remarkable is their direct approach to

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honour, violence, forced marriage, exploitation of the economy, and the unspoken psychological price of living under strict gender codes. Despite the significance of her work, Bano remains largely absent from international gender and postcolonial literary scholarship due to the lack of English translations. The few translated stories, including those analysed here, make Pakhtun gender relations accessible to global readers and masculinity studies.

There is little academic research on Bano in Pakistan and almost none in the international field of masculinity studies or postcolonial literary theory. This article intends to fill this gap. By applying the concepts of masculinity in crisis theory by Connell (1995), the cultural logic of Pakhtunwali, and the ideological contradiction concept by Belsey (2002) to three story of translated into English, the research makes two main new claims: first, that Bano's literary creation can be considered a systematic literary criticism of dominant masculinity in Pakhtun society; and second, that the translation of Bano's work into English creates the possibility of culturally mediating certain local gender constructions for a wider theoretical discourse.

This study analyses three of Bano's English-translated short stories, all published in the Pakistan Academy of Letters: 'The Gambler' (translated from Pashto to Urdu by Ali Kumail Qizilbash and from Urdu to English by Masror Hausen, 2002), 'The Luckiest' (translated by Nida Shafi, 2006), and 'The Straw Bridge' (translated by Sher Zaman Taizi, 2007). The three stories were picked as they jointly offer a panoramic perspective of the masculine crisis functioning on various social scales: the bureaucratic and existential (The Gambler), the domestic and marital (The Luckiest), and the systemic and exploitative (The Straw Bridge). Collectively, these enable a textually based study of how Pakhtunwali, the traditional ethical code of Pakhtun society, constructs masculine identity and at the same time destabilises it.

The analysis draws on Connell's (1995) theory of masculinity in crisis and Belsey's (2002) model of ideological contradiction in narrative. The main idea is that the male characters of Bano and the patriarchal systems he lives in are not depicted as inherently authoritative but structurally paradoxical, being unable to meet the moral requirements of the codes themselves, which authorise the power of these characters. By doing so, Bano's fiction is a continuous criticism of hegemonic masculinity that is even more valuable as it is written in the intimate register of fiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Masculinity: From Hegemony to Crisis: A paradigm shift occurred in the theoretical study of masculinity with the publication of Masculinities (1995) by Connell, who rejected biological determinism and redefined masculinity as a form of social practice through the play of power relations, institutional organization, and historical circumstances. The main idea of hegemonic masculinity, as proposed by Connell, the culturally dominant masculinity that legitimises male power and subordinates women and other forms of masculinity, was used to make sense of how the dominant gender norms are reproduced, challenged and changed. The consequence of destabilization of structures that uphold masculine dominance, whether brought about by economic instability, political change, or altered gender relations, is what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) conceived as masculinity in crisis: a situation where men are no longer able to successfully perform the gender norms that make them socially legitimate.

Kimmel (2012) extended this framework by considering that masculinity in crisis is experienced most acutely when the customary sources of male power, economic provision, social leadership, and physical dominance are undermined, producing anxiety, aggression, and moral confusion. Seidler (2006) added a psychological dimension, arguing that the emotional illiteracy demanded by hegemonic masculinity, the suppression of vulnerability, dependency, and affect generates profound internal suffering that patriarchal cultures have no legitimate means of addressing. Such theoretic work directly translates into Bano fiction, where the male characters are always depicted as being morally lost, emotionally repressed, and incapable of balancing the imperatives of cultural ideology with the facts of lived experience. However, it is important to note that Connell's framework emerged as an analysis of Western, postindustrial, societies. It needs a critical adaptation to be used in the Pakhtun context. Recent scholarship has progressively emphasized the need to reconsider hegemonic masculinity through decolonial and culturally specific perceptions rather than treating Western gender formations as universally applicable (Nayak, 2023). In Pakhtun society, masculinity in crisis has nothing to do with the changing norms of the industrial era but with the internal contradictions of a moral code (Pakhtunwali) whose demands exceed what any individual man can consistently fulfill. It is this cultural distinctiveness that Bano's fiction highlights; it is in this regard that her work progresses the theoretical framework beyond being only an example of it.

Masculinity in Postcolonial and South Asian Contexts: As Sinha (1995) and Ashcroft et al. (2003) have demonstrated, colonial rule generated new forms of masculine power that were internalised by colonized individuals and replicated in postcolonial institutions. Chopra et al. (2004) have argued that masculinity in South Asia is implicated in kinship networks, moral economies and community obligations and that crises of masculine legitimacy that occur when these structures are disrupted by migration, integration of classes or ideological change are experienced both in a personal and social sense. Thangaraj and Inhorn (2024) suggest that scholarship on masculinities in South Asia needs to consider local structures of kinship, religion, colonial legacy and social hierarchy and note the diversity and fluidity of masculine identities in South Asia.

In the Pakhtun context, Pakhtunwali, the traditional code of Pakhtun social life, has been conceived extensively as the main process by which the masculine identity is constructed and judged. Ahmed (2013) discovered that *nang* (honour), *ghairat* (courage), *badal* (revenge), *melmastia* (hospitality), and *nanawatai* (asylum) are the key pillars of Pakhtunwali and argued that Pakhtun masculinity is not about physical dominance but moral behaviour and social responsibility (Kha & Shah, 2026). Both Lindholm (1982) and Barth (1959) had warned against the assumption of Pakhtunwali as a fixed or standard code, and it is characterised by its situational and context-dependent nature. Recent scholarship indicates that conceptions of Pakhtun masculinity are not static but are reshaping by generational and educational shifts (Shah & Shah, 2023). According to Rouse (2004), not only are gendered subjectivities constructed through tribal traditions, but gender norms are the product of national politics, religious doctrine, and class differences. The wider structural framework can be useful for interpreting masculinity in crisis that emerges in Bano's fiction. This body of research is very much focused on a sociological/anthropological approach to Pakhtun masculinity, which does not delve into the literary dimension at all. In fact, none of the works discussed above have addressed the issue of the role played by fictional narrative, especially when authored by women, as a place of

representation of the contradictions inherent to Pakhtunwali. It is this gap that Bano's work fills and that the present study addresses.

Women Writing Masculinity in Pashto Literature: Pashto literature has been predominantly led by male authors who glorified martial masculinity, tribal leadership and resistance, traditions that were best represented bythe warrior-poetKhushal Khan Khattak of the seventeenth century. Modern criticism has proposed a gradual transformation of Pashto fiction to more introspective and critical depictions of the male identity, though this has been most steadily worked out by female authors. What makes Bano's fiction so unique is its dualist focus, not merely depicting female suffering; but also, a failure of the moral, emotional, and relational aspects of male characters who cannot fully act it out nor openly protest against the patriarchal codes they are bound to. This reading extends a pattern already observed in Pashto literary criticism, where Iftikhar et al. (2024) locates masculinity in crisis, not in individual weakness but in the structural contradictions of the patriarchal code itself.

Showalter (1997) and Mohanty (2003) have suggested that women's writing often displays the concealed expenses of patriarchy of both men and women, showing gender oppression as structural and not individual. An example of such a critical approach is Bano: the male characters in her work are not villains; they are just morally compromised subjects in the ideological systems that hurt everyone they come into contact with. Thismakes the fiction of Bano an important, yet under conceived, contribution to the world literature of masculinity in crisis. Most importantly, the existing Pashto literary criticism identified by Hurara (2025), who reads it as an ethnographic evidence of Pakhtun women's negotiation of Pakhtunwali codes, which fails to contextualize the author's work within the realm of international masculinity theory but rather limits itself to cultural observations. This study is innovative in its approach insofar as it applies the theoretical framework developed by Connell and Belsey to interpret Bano's writings and engagement with the more general issues of the social construction of gender.

Translation and Cultural Mediation: The role of translation in mediating depictions of gender across cultural and linguistic boundaries has been examined extensively by Venuti (2012) and Bassnett (2014). Venuti claims that translation is not a neutral practice of linguistic transfer but rather always ideological intervention: translators make decisions that may or may not tame cultural difference, keeping the foreign text as strange as it was in the original text and exposing the assumptions of the target culture. The culturally specific notions of Pakhtunwali, *nang, ghairat, and jirga* have an ethical, emotional charge in the case of Bano's short stories, which have no direct analogue in English, and the decisions made by the translators in their translations have repercussions on the meanings accessible to readers of the English language.

Bassnett (2014) states that sensitive translation can both respect cultural distinctiveness and facilitate cross-cultural understanding, which is what she terms ‘cultural mediation,’ different to the idea of linguistic substitution. The English translations of the stories by Bano that are discussed in this paper do just that: they preserve culturally specific lexicon and social background but make it accessible to the readers who may not be aware of Pakhtun society and thus place the critique of patriarchal masculinity in Bano in the context of the transnational discourse of gender studies. It must be acknowledged that the strategies of foreignization cannot be considered uniform since they are based on subjective judgments rather than on an ideological stance. Such inconsistency is analytically significant, as it highlights the degree to which the

cultural significance of Bano's critique is partly determined by the translator's decisions beyond her control.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is systematised around intersecting theoretical frameworks. The major paradigm is the theory of masculinity in crisis by Connell (1995) that gives the conceptual terminology of examining how dominant masculine norms turn out to be ethically unstable and emotionally intolerable in the conditions of social transformation. Connell's insistence that masculinity is a relational and historically contingent set of practices, not a fixed biological essence, which allows for reading Bano's male characters as subjects formed by, and subject to, specific cultural demands that they cannot consistently fulfil.

The other is the model of ideological contradiction by Catherine Belsey (2002), who argues that literary texts are spaces in which dominant ideologies are replicated and shaken by the narrative tension, characterization, and symbolic detail. When applied to the fiction of Bano, this framework lets one consider her stories not merely as social realism but as ideologically charged works that bring to the surface the internal contradictions of Pakhtun patriarchy, the contradictions that exist in the culture but that are repressed in its dominant self-representations. All are theoretically rooted in a broadly feminist perspective, which Tong and Botts (2018) call a feminist analysis of gender as a system of power at three levels: ideology, social structure, and lived experience. This is the orientation that makes Connell's sociological house of masculinity and Belsey's literary-critical approach, through which their contradictions are made visible in the text.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative close textual analysis as its prime method. The corpus involves three English-translated stories by Zaitoon Bano, all published in the Pakistan Academy of Letters: The Gambler (trans. Masror Hausen, 2002), The Luckiest (trans. Nida Shafi, 2006), and The Straw Bridge (trans. Sher Zaman Taizi, 2007). These three texts were chosen due to their thematic focus regarding male authority, the patriarchal structure, and gender relations as well as because they symbolise a variety of social contexts: the workplace, the domestic household, and the world of exploitation in which the crisis of masculinity is depicted in the fiction by Bano.

The method of analysis is to define and explain the narrative techniques such as characterization, focalization, symbolic imagery, and narrative framing, which could serve to reveal the instability of manhood and the power of patriarchy. The texts are approached through the prism of Connell's theory of masculinity in crisis, focusing on the cultural terms and social codes that define the lives of the characters in question. This is analysed story by story, and then conclusions are made cross-textually based on the methodological principle that theoretical propositions should be based upon particular textual evidence and not merely on secondary accounts of the work. There is the added methodological concern of the use of translated texts. Following Venuti (2012) and Bassnett (2014), the translations are not seen as mere windows onto the original Pashto texts but as cultural translations with their own interpretative burden.

Data Collection

The main data used for this study is three published English translations of Zaitoon Bano's short stories, which are taken from the Pakistan Academy of Letters. A systematic search of academic databases and institutional library sources was used to gather secondary data, which included theoretical frameworks, critical scholarship on masculinity studies, Pakhtunwali, gender studies, and translation theory. The search terms used were Pashto literature and gender, Pakhtunwali masculinity, and Connell's hegemonic masculinity.

Sampling and Selection Criteria

The sampling technique used is purposive sampling. Three stories from the limited English corpus of Bano's work were chosen based on the following selection criteria: (1) they are available in a published and accessible English translation; (2) they are thematically related to themes of masculinity, patriarchy, and gender crisis; and (3) they are socially diverse, covering a range of social contextual domains, including the domestic/marital, systemic/economic, and existential. The selected stories (The Gambler, The Luckiest, and The Straw Bridge) were purposely chosen to be a sample adequate for in-depth qualitative analysis within the limited scope and objectives of this article but not required to be representative of the entire Bano corpus. Data has been thematically analysed under four analytical nodes that include (a) Representations of Masculine Identity and Crisis; (b) Pakhtunwali Codes; (c) Narrative Strategies; and (d) Translation Options and Ideological Implications.

ANALYSIS

The Gambler: Masculinity in Crisis as Existential Entrapment: The Gambler represents the least direct exploration of the three stories in its treatment of masculinity in crisis, but it is also most philosophically focused. The main character of the novel, Junaid, is a government office employee whose inner world is pervaded by one, obsessive thought: 'we are all in prison...we are all prisoners'. The story centers around the choice Junaid makes to interfere in this ritual and seize and put in an eternal cage the single bird that keeps going back to be sold and re-sold, the symbolic meaning of which echoes throughout the story about the issue of freedom, entrapment, and the futility of the male circle.

The character of Junaid is specifically designed to represent that particular variant of masculinity in crisis, which Connell (1995) links to the breakdown of the institutional masculine power. Junaid is a graduate-level educated person. His education was a master's degree; he knew typing and shorthand, but his career is one of demotion, anonymity, and compromise. His first job demanded not talent, but an introduction powerful enough that not even the dustbin could absorb his resume, and his present status in the office is defined by the lack of interest of his fellow workers and the scorn of his boss. One of the most resonant symbolic details in the story is the picture of the dustbin, of which Junaid, Bano tells us, was so hateful on the very first day of his job in the office. His initial job application was cut into bits and thrown away, so many bits that a heart breaks when a candidate learns that an undeserving person was appointed in his place. The dustbin is not just a bit of office furniture but the symbol of the system where masculine value determined in Pakhtun culture by honour, achievement and social position is systematically denied.

This denial is interrelated to the Pakhtunwali idea of *nang*. The honour of a man in Pakhtun social ideology is intertwined with his ability to gain a reputation, take care of his dependants, and sustain his status in society. The humiliations which Junaid has suffered in the world of work - the ripped application, the unheard leave application, the accountant dumping his papers in the dustbin without reading them - all add up to a systematic attack on his *nang*, which leaves him psychologically and ethically lost. This is a valid reflection of contemporary thinking on work and masculinity that holds that masculinity is formed and judged in the institutions and work contexts. Giazitzoglu (2025) says that masculinities are constituted and performed in work and employment settings and that status, recognition and authority are central to men's sense of self. Junaid's occupational marginalisation is thus not only a frustration to his career, but also a sense of masculinity in crisis. The repetition of the line in his mind, 'We are all prisoners', is not just a personal protest but a diagnosis of what has happened to manhood in a system that claims to offer dignity but in reality, offers subordination.

The rickshaw driver functions in the story as a mirror image of Junaid, another man who has constructed a private ritual to manage his relation to freedom and entrapment but one who has entirely abandoned the social markers of masculine success. He had 'no relations, never married and ate out at the shrine of Bara Baba', spending all his earnings on buying and releasing birds. Where Junaid is entangled in office politics, family obligation, and the performance of respectable masculinity, the rickshaw driver has opted out of these structures entirely. Yet Bano does not idealise this alternative: the rickshaw driver's ritual is also futile, since the special bird returns every day to the seller. His 'vexation was reflected in his smile and his looks' - a double bind of pleasure and frustration that mirrors Junaid's own entrapment.

Junaid's decisive act of buying the special bird, having a cage made for it, and throwing the key in the river is the story's most dramatically charged moment, and it is one that yields strikingly unsure meanings. On one reading, Junaid is asserting agency in a world that has denied him any: he intervenes in a cycle of futile repetition and breaks it permanently. On another reading, his action simply extends the logic of entrapment he has complained about all along: the prisoner, unable to free himself, imprisons the bird instead. Bano makes no authorial judgement; she ends the story with Junaid back at his regular spot, watching the rickshaw driver, while the voices continue in his mind: 'We are all prisoners.' The indirectness is complete. Junaid has not resolved his crisis; he has merely displaced it onto another creature.

Such a narrative structure enacts just what Belsey (2002) terms an ideological contradiction': the story is at once displaying masculine agency, the decisive gesture of intervention, and revealing its futility and moral ambiguity. The man who is complaining about being in prison becomes a prison agent. The critique of masculinity of patriarchy in this case is not made in an obvious way but rather in the form of narrative irony, which is typical of the entire fiction of Bano.

The Luckiest: Honour, Exclusion, and the Collapse of Patriarchal Complicity: Masculinity in crisis as depicted in 'The Luckiest' centers on a female protagonist, the nameless bride of Hidayat, who was built up as such solely on the basis of her involvement with patriarchy's structures of luck, favour, and servitude. The title of the story is rather ironic since the bride was called 'the luckiest' by her mother-in-law as she arrived in their house after its successful performance, as a result of which they have become 'considered as respectable people', as said by

'her innocent and simple mother-in-law'. The bride has internalised this designation so thoroughly that she experiences it as her identity, taking pride in being considered auspicious and superior to other women.

The story's critique of Pakhtun patriarchal masculinity is conducted indirectly, through the figure of the absent husband Hidayat and the faceless structures of the family that surround the bride. Hidayat himself barely appears in the narrative; he is present as a code, the man through whose household the bride's identity is mediated, and his absence from the story's emotional centre is itself a comment on the nature of masculine authority in Pakhtun domestic life. The husband does not need to be present to exert power; the structures of the family, the mother-in-law's pronouncements, and the ideology of female luck and misfortune do his work for him. Gender hegemony is not maintained by the explicit threat of men, but rather by structural arrangements that do not challenge gender and sexual inequality, as Bridges and Pascoe (2018) would argue.

The pivot of the story is the bride's exclusion from the wedding of her younger brother-in-law. She has prepared herself elaborately; She had dressed elaborately embroidered clothes, heavy jewelry, red lipstick and kajal — ready to participate in the celebration. At this moment, her mother-in-law intervenes: 'look, when the bride reaches, you should not appear in front of her; she should not see you initially.' The mother-in-law then leaves, and the bride is 'still like death'. Months of being designated 'the luckiest' have been cancelled in a single sentence. The new bride will be the lucky one now.

The devastating logic of this moment reveals the nature of the Pakhtunwali-inflected concept of feminine luck (and its corollary, female ill-omen or *spaira*) as an instrument of patriarchal control. The bride's identity has never been her own; it was always conferred by the male household's prosperity and was therefore always revocable. This is made clear earlier in the narrative when the mother-in-law declares that the bride brought good fortune to the household: 'After you came to our house, my son got a promotion.' The idea that the bride's good fortune is linked with her husband's career success means that by using it for her husband, she has lost all her fortune. In contrast to masculinity in crisis, which emerge from the lives of specific male characters, this one emerges from the nature of the system itself, which creates identities for women based on how well the man does at work and can strip away those identities arbitrarily, without notice or warning. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued, there are times when masculinity in crisis manifests in the lives of women rather than men themselves, due to how their lives are lived in support of the performance of masculine authority.

This final image is one of the most powerful ones in the translations of Bano's work. The protagonist watches the new bride being carried into her house in the doli and says, 'She felt like her kind-hearted husband was put to bed; she felt that was her fortune's funeral that had come to home. Maybe she (the new bride) is the luckiest.' The term 'fortune funeral' here indicates that it is not simply an idea of self that has died, but the protagonist's entire sense of self that is now lost to her.

The Straw Bridge: Systemic Masculine Failure and the Exploitation of Female Aspiration: Of the three stories mentioned, 'The Straw Bridge' story features the highest structural complexity and is most explicit about its confrontation with the systemic oppression by men. 'The Straw Bridge'is told through a frame narrative in which an educated woman narrator discovers that her household servant, Sabro Auntie, can read English. This revelation opens onto

Sabro's traumatic life story, tracing her journey across multiple geographic and social settings, from a girls' college hostel to the Bombay film industry, to a brothel, to a refugee camp, and the systematic destruction of her aspirations by a series of men who exploit her beauty, her ambition, and her naivety.

Sabro's story; also known as Nuri, a name given to her in Bombay, begins with a recognizable form of masculine failure: the failure of fathers. She tells her narrator: 'My father was a rich man.' The father's wealth enabled her education; she attended college and lived in a hostel but offered no protection against the cultural forces that would eventually destroy her. The first direct agent of her exploitation is the Bombay film director who recruits her with elaborate promises: 'What is Nur Jehan? Khurshid is not worth a dime. What is Surraya? Nuri will leave them all behind.' This speech is a master class in the rhetoric of hegemonic masculine patronage: the director positions himself as the gatekeeper of female success, offering Nuri a path to fame and recognition while systematically isolating her from other women ('Nuri, be careful; don't listen to other actresses') and preparing her for exploitation. This is what Connell (1995) defines as the system of gender relations that presents the currently accepted solution to the question of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which secures the dominant position of men and the supremacy of women.

The director's proposal exemplifies the exploitation of a woman through the masculine code of honour, by promising, 'The marriage will enhance your status and people will respect you. 'In this case, he appeals to the concept of feminine weakness, using such a statement as 'the chastity of every girl was at risk in that place' to present himself as a protector who is willing to take responsibility for the girl's well-being but in fact is just another exploiter. After fulfilling his mission, he leaves the girl without any second thoughts, using such words as 'From today you are divorced.' My wife is coming from her house. The lack of justification for such a casual dismissal is an example of what Connell (1995) refers to as 'entitlement logic' within hegemonic masculinity; whereby masculine dominance is not subject to explanation. The ease with which he abandons her shows how masculinity and honour in this context are never a moral commitment but rather a tool used to exert power.

The next stages in the exploitation of Sabro - through selling her by an older woman for six hundred rupees to a brothel, being forced to start her life as a prostitute, and then running away with a customer - illustrate the increasing failures of masculinity within all spheres of society. Individual men fail her: the director, the old woman's son-in-law, and the unnamed client who eventually becomes her husband. Social institutions fail her: the court, as another actress tells her, 'Would not listen to me; instead, they would support him as he was a man of high status. 'Sabro's appeal to legal institutions represents what Kandiyoti (1988) calls a patriarchal bargain strategy within concrete constraints to achieve maximum security, but one the system refuses to honour. In addition, the family fails her: unable to return home 'fearing reprisal of my folly', she is cut off from the kinship networks that Pakhtunwali ideally designates as the source of protection and justice.

The title of the story, 'The Straw Bridge', captures this analysis. A straw bridge is a structure that appears to offer crossing but that cannot bear weight: it promises connection and passage while guaranteeing collapse. Sabro's entire trajectory is a sequence of straw bridges: the director's marriage, the old woman's protection, and the promise of respectability, each of which gives way under the weight of masculine bad faith. The title is also a subtle commentary on the systems of

social support - family, community, and Pakhtunwali- that are supposed to protect women and men from exploitation but that, in Bano's fiction, consistently fail to do so.

The story's resolution is characteristically double-edged. Sabro has found a measure of stability as a domestic worker; her son Younus, child of the director, is now the son of a polisher, doing 'a menial job for two annas. The narrator resolves to treat Younus as a brother and to support the family. But Bano refuses to emotionalize this ending: the narrator's final reflection that if Sabro had not taken an oath of secrecy, 'she would have been a teacher or nurse by now' is a quiet indictment of the entire social system that has reduced a college-educated woman of talent and beauty to domestic service. But for Sabro, the straw bridges of masculine patronage have been rendered not destroyed but diminished – still alive but no longer at the level to which her abilities entitled.

Cross-Textual Patterns: The Architecture of Masculinity in Crisis in Bano's Fiction: The three stories share recurring themes that reflect Bano's perspective on masculinity in crisis within Pakhtun culture, particularly the gap between masculine discourse and reality. In 'The Gambler', Junaid's education and employment should guarantee masculine authority, yet he remains powerless and morally lost. In 'The Luckiest', Hidayat is the structural presence representing family honour and fortune, yet he is absent in terms of personal involvement in the narrative, acting out his masculine power through impersonal rather than direct moral engagement. In 'The Straw Bridge', the film director presents himself as a gentleman and protector, while in reality, he is a predator with the use of honourable words. Both cases illustrate how the symbols of being a man – education, financial gain, status, and moral words are devoid of any ethics.

The second theme is the emotional toll of performing masculinities. Junaid's restlessness, obsession with the crossing, and trapping of the bird reflect the absence of culturally accepted outlets for his feelings of estrangement and sadness. In 'The Luckiest,' for instance, the unnamed bride's husband fails to recognise her psychological difficulties and to intervene as an emotional resource that might hinder the structural process of alienation and exclusion experienced by that woman. In 'The Straw Bridge', the same idea can be noticed when the protagonists describe the emotional inaccessibility of the exploitative male individuals. The former's charm and kindness towards Sabro is just a tactic to exploit and exclude her. In this respect, Seidler's (2006) idea that the emotional illiteracy encouraged by hegemonic masculinity is not only an individual problem but, indeed, finds its expression as a structural element of patriarchal culture that Bano's fiction constantly lays bare.

The third pattern is the depiction of Bano's feminine consciousness as a means of demonstrating masculinity in crisis. In the three stories, the dominant or mediator consciousness is female, except for Junaid's story, which is the exception, inasmuch as it features a male hero. But even here, the point of view is from the perspective of an external observer, not that of Junaid as a rationalizing self-justifier. In 'The Luckiest' and 'The Straw Bridge,' Bano makes use of female consciousness whose pain illustrates the nature of masculine failure better than any male can through introspection. This narrative strategy is consistent with the feminist critical principle articulated by Showalter (1997) and Mohanty (2003): that women's writing exposes the hidden costs of patriarchy precisely because it refuses to adopt the ideological perspective of those who benefit from it. Through a steadfast focus on the perception of male failure through a female perception, Bano creates in the form what Belsey (2002) theorizes about; that contradictions in

an ideology only become apparent when seen through a perspective that is not entirely absorbed by the dominant ideology.

DISCUSSION

In conclusion, the textual analysis provided above supports and expands upon existing academic research regarding the theme of masculinity in crisis within postcolonial literature, particularly from South Asia. Bano's novels reveal that the masculinity in crisis among Pakhtuns is less about weak or immoral characters who are unable to fulfill societal expectations than about the ideological framework itself. While the codes of Pakhtunwali guarantee men moral superiority through the virtues of honour, courage, and accountability, the stories show how this ideology fails to uphold these claims under current circumstances.

Recent research also demonstrates that educated Pakhtun women actively renegotiate the meanings of core Pakhtunwali values, challenging men's traditional authority over cultural norms (Israr et al., 2024). This finding resonates with Yousaf's (2021) postcolonial feminist critique of Pakhtunwali, which links masculine identity directly to male honour and the maintenance of rigid gender hierarchies, and it also reflects Kimmel's (2012) argument that masculinity enters a period of crisis when established patriarchal structures are challenged without being replaced by an alternative social order. However, what Bano's fictional works contribute to this discussion is the literary representation of the psychological and social consequences of masculinity in crisis, which is described as existential imprisonment (The Gambler), familial displacement (The Luckiest), and economic manipulation (The Straw Bridge).

The translations in these cases are significantly varied in nature. While Hausen's translation of 'The Gambler' is quite minimalistic in nature and uses symbolism, Taizi's translation of 'The Straw Bridge' is more elaborate and situational in nature. On the other hand, Shafi's translation of 'The Luckiest' is similar in nature to the original story in terms of its closeness to daily life as well as the use of structural irony.

Culturally specific terms are maintained rather than being translated in accordance with the idea of foreignization suggested by Venuti (2012). These translations play an important role in ensuring that Bano's work retains its critical value because they allow the reader to appreciate the culture-specific nature of the story. The translation choices have impacts on the depiction of gender and cultural notions. The English texts, for example, fail to domesticate the concepts of *nang* and *ghairat*, otherwise it loses the moral and social weight, reducing them to mere equivalents like 'courage' or 'honour'. In the same way, a paraphrase of 'bad luck' would neutralise the ideological violence of the concept that is preserved in 'The Luckiest' by retaining the presence of *spaira* (female ill-omen). All three translators work within a general foreignizing trend, that can be said to be part of Bano's critical project; they render the familiar, yet they make it strange, prompting the reader to look at gender formations that challenge the cultural common sense.

CONCLUSION

The current study has focused on the portrayal of masculinity in crisis in three English-translated short stories by Zaitoon Bano. In doing so, a careful textual analysis of her works has shown that she offers a coherent and well-grounded literary critique of hegemonic masculinity in

Pakhtun society. These selected stories collectively illustrate that Bano's critique functions not at the level of individual moral failure but at the level of systemic ideological contradiction, revealing how Pakhtunwali, in spite of its claims to moral authority, constantly produces the very suffering it promises to avoid.

What differentiates Bano's literary intervention from sociological accounts of masculinity in crisis is precisely this narrative dimension: her fiction is not a diagnosis from the outside of patriarchy but is a dramatization from the inside, exposing what patriarchy most strives to obscure. The three analysed translations allow locally specific representations of Pakhtun gender relations to come into contact with broader theoretical discourses, creating the potential for meaningful dialogue that will enhance both masculinity studies and Pashto literary criticism.

Limitations

The analysis is restricted to only three short stories translated into English, which is a small part of Zaitoon Bano's works. Although the use of purposive sampling is suitable for close text analysis, thus the findings have not been generalised to other texts. This study engages entirely with literary representations of masculinity in crisis.

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