

Traversing the Erotopolitic: A Feminist Perspective on Sabyn Javeri's *Nobody Killed Her* and *Hijabistan*

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore the use of biopolitics by Sabyn Javeri's female characters in *Nobody Killed Her* and *Hijabistan* to challenge the structures of power depicted in the works. Sabyn Javeri's characters are shown to be engaged in various attempts to disrupt the heteronormative structures of authority while making use of their body as a locus of power struggle. The article highlights how these characters perform different acts that may be defined as transgressive to restructure the societies they exist in. In the case of certain women characters, the treatment of the body as a site of political wrangling entails the use of sexually subversive practices to resist the patriarchal societies they inhabit. This research argues that the politically and economically marginalized women characters are shown to be involved in politics of the body, including erotopolitics, to question the traditional ways of being in the patriarchal societies. While focusing on the discussion of body politics, this research attempts to analyse the usefulness of employing the body in order to challenge the institutions of authority in the selected texts. It also discusses the potential setbacks of using the body as a site of political drama since it runs the risk of promoting the persecution of the already marginalized female individuals. This research focuses on acts of resistance against institutional apparatuses as well as the repressive practices by institutionalised authority that come into play as a result of these actions.

Keywords: biopolitics, erotopolitics, gender studies, political liberation, sexual transgression

Introduction

Sabyn Javeri's fiction, *Nobody Killed Her* (2017) and *Hijabistan* (2019), displays a recurrent interplay of biopolitics¹ as the most potent tool employed by the female characters in order to subvert the normative social and political order. In both of the selected works, there are multiple instances that demonstrate various forms of political resistance while using their bodies as a site of war between institutionalized power and individual autonomy. Sara Mills (2003), points out that according to Michel Foucault, "the body should be seen as the focus of a number of discursive pressures: the body is the site on which the discourses are enacted and where they are contested" (p. 81). While making use of their bodies as fields of political power play, certain characters also employ their sexualities as means to achieve various political ends. This use of erotics to exert influence in the power apparatus may be referred to as erotopolitics.

The employment of erotopolitics, mainly in the form of perverse sexual behaviour, by female characters in the works is complicated and may be viewed from different critical angles. First of all, it may be deemed as liberating as it certainly rejects the traditional social and sexual roles defined by patriarchy for women in a particular society. Secondly, this practice may be considered problematic as it is also likely to further intensify persecution and marginalization of these characters in the male-dominated society in which they exist. Upon reading the selected pieces of fiction, we can observe that Javeri's works depict various ways her female characters make use of their sexuality in order to question the straitjacket tradition in which their lives are confined. At times, Javeri shows them to be successful at achieving this.

On the contrary, there are also instances where the intended acts of power disruption lead to further marginalization of the women in the selected works. While examining the complexity attached to the use of one's sexuality as a means of sexual as well as political liberation, we employ Judith Butler's (2004) notion of "vulnerability" in context of the blatant expression of sexuality by certain individuals (p. xii). Butler argues that in power apparatuses, "there are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others" (2004, p. xii). Butler defines 'vulnerability' in relation to the war on terror in the wake of 9/11. We, on the other hand, use this concept to explore the 'vulnerability' that may be generated when individuals employ acts of sexual subversion to challenge homogeneous authority. The danger of more 'vulnerability' lies in the fact that it sometimes seemingly creates an even more oppressive environment for the women characters by rigidifying the discrimination they experience in phallogocentric societies depicted in the works. Lastly, we discuss whether the idea of foregrounding and advocating for eroticism as a useful means of (sexual) resistance and liberation may be a practical one, keeping the religious and cultural aspects of the society in question.

This paper makes use of the above-mentioned ideas while exploring the notions of sexuality and sexual liberation that were popularised during the second wave of feminism.

Analysis

The primary texts selected for this article revolve around female characters who are constantly striving to navigate the web of power structures in which they exist. Both of these works are rife with sexual symbols and imagery. This indicates the significance of

¹ Biopolitics or bios may be defined as the political forms of life in contrast to the bare animal life i.e. zoe. This

distinction is made by Giorgio Agamben in his work *Homo Sacer*.

the sexual identities of the characters in defining them as subjects. The works also exhibit how the sexual practices of these characters hold a central position when it comes to effecting their power in the power apparatuses. Most of the times, these practices are shown to be transgressive in nature that challenge the exiting status quo. This analysis focusses on the ways these acts of subversion sometimes successfully function to break down the repressive power apparatuses. On the other hand, the research also highlights how these transgressions lead to severe instances of 'vulnerability' and marginalization.

Liberation and Punishment in Nobody Killed Her

Nobody Killed Her dramatizes the interactions between individuals and institutions in order to showcase the conflicts that arise out of the contact between the two. As a result of this, the body of the individual serves as a dynamic entity that undergoes multitudes of changes within itself while attempting to deconstruct power. Therefore, it appears that the body experiences various instances of integrations as well as disintegrations while it engages with institutional authority in order to dismantle it. Viewing an individual in such a framework leads us to conceive them as an entity that evades essentialism and provides a rich site for evolution. Michel Foucault discusses the dynamism attached with the individual as follows:

... the individual is not to be conceived of as a sort of elementary nucleus ... on which power comes to fasten ... In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

What Foucault emphasizes here is that certain individuals come to hold a certain socio-political status in society as a result of the dictates of institutional authority. Consequently, some individuals come to occupy the positions of privilege while others are relegated to peripheries of society. The character of Nazo in the selected novel presents the latter kind of an individual that goes through different kinds of making and un-making while attempting to locate herself in the power structure. Nazo is portrayed to be struggling to get some share of power within the power apparatus through multiple acts of political manoeuvring.

Through Nazo, Javeri has established a character that is polyvalently marginalized from the onset of the narrative. Nazo is a dis-enfranchised individual that comes from an economically and politically under-privileged background. She, along with her family, faces political persecution because of their involvement in her home country's politics; her father is murdered by a dictator's regime for supporting the democratic party that stood against the military rule in the country (Javeri, 2017, p. 4). Nazo seeks asylum in the USA and continues her life there. Nazo's multi-layered marginalization draws attention to the ways the economic and political disempowerment of an individual play a role in increasing discrimination for such individuals on the basis of their gender identity. This paper focusses on Nazo's alienation and the accompanying injustice that is meted out to her because of her gender and sexuality. However, one may not simply disregard the economic and political factors that underpin the issues of gender politics.

Keeping the central character's political and economic underprivileged status may also be considered important since this may be the reason for her having to rely upon her body and the use of erotics as means of garnering power. In Foucauldian terms, her body may be viewed as "the inscribed surface of events" that come into play as the narrative moves forward (qtd. in Mills, 2003, p. 83). This is probably why Nazo seeks to align herself with the daughter of a former Prime Minister and an aspiring politician, Rani Madam.

This symbiotic alliance gives Nazo an opportunity to ground herself socially and politically to achieve her political agenda. For this reason, she views Rani as "the Prophetess who would rid [her and her country people] of the General]" (2017, p. 6). Rani is able to wield power in the political apparatus and thus appears to be the best means for Nazo through which to achieve her political goals. Rani's political career also has international political backing as "[t]he West seemed to like the idea of a woman who had survived the General's coup, this veil-less Muslim woman who threatened the status-quo with her unusual western education and liberal outlook (2017, pp. 8-9). In return for this covert political representation, she serves Rani as a personal assistant and confidant.

Despite being a much more powerful character socially, politically and economically, it is Rani who appears to be functioning as Nazo's surrogate and alter ego. Here Javeri as a writer performs an act of subversion through her writing when she creates the unprivileged character as the central one while treating Rani as a mere shadow of the former. Nazo employs Rani as a vessel and channelizes her energies in attempts to challenge the socio-political power structures. In the following lines, Nazo reflects on her role in Rani's life:

I don't know what I consider myself, I thought, as I stepped out into the harsh light to buy your cigarettes. Your protector? Well-wisher? Friend? Healer? Schemer? A witch from *Macbeth*, here to make you king ... Or perhaps I was more suited to the role of the evil wife who made him murderer. (2017, pp. 62 -63)

Here the comparison that she draws with Lady Macbeth is of great significance since both Nazo and Lady Macbeth do not enjoy any power in the political apparatus and have to work from behind the curtains in order to exert any political influence. Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth takes aid of her husband, Macbeth, to help her actualize snatching of power and to insert herself successfully into the lacanian symbolic order that simply does not permit her entrance into it because of her identity as a woman. Her cries for "unsex me here" seem to reverberate in my selected text too through Nazo's character albeit in a different manner (Act 1, scene 5). Nazo, contrarily, does not express any desire to shed her female identity and don a male one in order to make a place in the social apparatus. In her case, she makes use of another woman, who is much more powerful and politically stronger than her, to execute the "phallic function" in the power apparatus (Luepnitz, 2003, p. 226). Deborah Luepnitz defines the Lacanian 'phallic function' in the following words:

Lacan would speak of the phallus not as a thing but as a position through which different objects circulate. Adults can use wealth, accomplishments, or their own children as phallic objects. In this way the objects are desired for their representative value, their capacity to make the subject feel complete. The "phallic function", in other words, is not gender-specific; it relates to being and having, to lack and denial of lack. (2003, p. 226)

The Lady Macbeth analogy simultaneously accentuates Nazo's helplessness and her resourcefulness for relying on another woman for the 'phallic function'. The choice of a woman substitute, instead of a man, for the actualization of her political and social aspirations is significant since this is in perfect alignment with the second wavers' advocacy of the acceptance and celebration of the female body. It also reveals how Nazo desires Rani not just for who she is as an individual but also because of her representative value in the socio-political order.

Moreover, using Lady Macbeth as a metaphor for herself, Nazo also reveals the homosexual nature of relation that the two

women share with each other. Javeri's narrative progressively shows that the deepening of sexual affinities between the two female characters leads to strengthening of their political bond as well. Here, we can see how Nazo employs erotics as a source of power for her political activism in this situation. Audre Lorde (1993), suggests that "[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unrecognised feeling" (p. 61). In the novel, Nazo fully 'recognizes' this reservoir of power and attempts to make use of this reservoir in order to bring about political change. Keeping this in mind, it may be suggested that instead of actualizing her sexuality as a queer person, Nazo's actual goal is to impact political change while using all and any resources that she possibly can.

The novel illustrates that Nazo's political efforts that help propel Rani Madam into a position of power. Rani aspires to challenge the General that dethroned her father, the former prime minister, and plant herself as the new prime minister of her country. To achieve this goal, she forces herself to marry Balgodi to render herself more acceptable to "govern a country full of Jihadists" (2017, p. 30). She follows the dictates of "compulsory heterosexuality" in order to be able to fully assimilate into the society she desires to rule (Rich, 2002, p. 632).

The exchange of violence that takes place when Reed (another political aide) previously proposes this alliance to Rani may be viewed as an act of resistance on Rani's part to evade socially acceptable behaviours. The fact that Rani behaves "feverishly" and "collapse[s] onto the floor" reveals the distress that the idea of a heterosexual marriage brings to her (2017, p. 31). Javeri also shows how Rani seeks refuge into Nazo's arms who sprinkles water on her face in an attempt to soothe her. Nazo deems "the whole act as intimate as baptizing a newborn" which gives a sense of political rebirth to Rani (2017, p. 31). This interaction between the Nazo and Rani is very telling of their relationship because it shows Nazo to be occupying the role of a saviour and mentor whereas Rani is shown to be babylike and innocent. Through this depiction, Javeri manages to deconstruct the binaries that she primarily erected about the identities of the two women where Rani was portrayed to be on the superior status and Nazo to be on a much inferior one. Here the roles are reversed and are indicative of Nazo gradually accumulating political power as the narrative develops.

The narrative clearly depicts that Nazo has been able to coerce Rani to pursue the said goals precisely because of the sexual nature of the relationship that the two come to share with each other. The following lines shed light on their relationship:

I took off my hijab and started cleaning your feet. I felt your hand stroke my hair. It was like a blessing. Almost maternal. Yet there was something else. Something almost primal that I could not ignore. The heat . . . the heat in the room was damning. (2017, p. 72)

Nazo seems to be able to sway Rani's opinion and compel her to take certain political decisions because they are shown to be engaged in a homoerotic relationship. However, the narrative also emphasises on the ever-present threat that accompanies Nazo's desire for Rani. Judith Feher-Gurewich (2003), comments on this perversion to the traditional social order in the following words:

Perverts excel in exposing the fantasy of the other and various social lies that such fantasy necessarily enforces. This peculiar situation explains, on some level, why perversion has been received as a threat to the social bond. The mission of pervers does not involve a wish to be happy. What they want at all costs is to discover a law, beyond the mask of the social order, that can bring solace to their torment. (p. 192)

Nazo revels in the relationship that she manages to create with Rani because it not only provides her with sexual gratification but also serves as a fuel for her political ambitions. However, this perverse sexual behaviour creates an uneasiness between Nazo and Rani because of the subversion that is attached to it. Rani, in particular, chooses to pretend to be oblivious to their sexual intimacy in the day time because this kind of sexual conduct stands in opposition to how the traditional, male-dominated society that she exists in. The following lines highlight the dichotomous and ambivalent relationship that Rani is shown to be having with her sexual identity:

In the coming weeks, you were edgy, nervous and uneasy around me. It never occurred to me that you could be ashamed of our intimacy. In fact, I doubted that you even remembered, clouded as you were in the haze of alcohol. I thought it was because you had other more damning things in mind. Pressure was building up from all quarters for you to marry. It seemed impossible enough that a woman could contest elections, but an unmarried woman – a joke. (2017, p. 73)

These lines reveal the paradoxical relationship that Rani has with her sexuality. On the one hand, she chooses to engage with Nazo in a homosexual relationship in the privacy of her house. On the other hand, in front of the public she presents herself as a heterosexual woman in order to maintain her image as that of a good, virtuous woman in the public eye. For Nazo too, the relationship provides with both good and bad outcomes. On the one hand, it serves as a reservoir of potential for her, providing her the opportunity to exert influence in the social apparatus through Rani. On the other, it puts her in the direct clash with the cultural and societal norms. Despite enjoying the intimacy they share and drawing energy from it, Rani feels 'ashamed' of the nature of their relationship. Furthermore, she has to curb her carnal desire for another woman and conform to the society's acceptable form of heterosexual desire in women in order to be considered a worthy political candidate for elections. This again shows how Rani's entrance into the power structure necessitates her conforming to the normative modes of sexuality, whereas Nazo's only chance to have a bit of political power seems to reside in the erotics that she engages in.

The attitude of the two women regarding their sexuality also reveals the presence of two of the binary oppositions about gender and sexuality that Lisa McLaughlin (1991), talks about in her essay "Discourse of Prostitution/discourses of Sexuality". She points out that there are various kinds of binaries that have been established between the genders and also among the female gender itself that helps perpetuate the traditional image of the heterosexual woman in media representations. McLaughlin observes that "an opposition is set up between the prostitute and traditionally 'virtuous' female figures, such as the wife, mother, or daughter" (1991, p. 257). In the selected text, it may be observed that this binary is created between Nazo, the woman who belongs to the lower class and sells her body to gain economic and political levy, and Rani, the rich and politically strong woman who hopes to become the prime minister of the country. However, this is not the only binary that one may observe while reading the text; the narrative also shows the dichotomous and contradictory attitude of Rani herself toward her sexuality. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, she demonstrates the "same opposition" within herself as well as she struggles to come to terms with her sexuality (2017, p. 257).

Keeping in line with the foregoing argument, one may say that Nazo represents the real, untainted female being that feels at home with her sexuality draws her power from the erotics that are

native to her. She may be viewed a woman completely in touch with the “infinite richness of [her] individual constitution” (Cixous, 2009, p. 876). Rani, on the other hand, portrays the conformist, patriarchal woman who stands for and perpetuates the traditional, phallogocentric order. Here we may read the two female characters vis-a-vis Lacan’s “primary repression” as explained by Toril Moi (1995), in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1995, 97). Since Nazo stays persistent in challenging the patriarchal system of society by advocating women empowerment, she is the one who defies the Lacanian symbolic order. She seems to draw *jouissance* i.e. “a brief moment of joy or terror or desire that some arises from deep within our unconscious psyche” from going against the grain despite being punished by it time and again (Bressler, 1999, p. 136). On the contrary, Rani chooses to accept the repression exerted by the symbolic order by being subservient to the traditional, patriarchal standards of her society.

The point of emphasis in this discussion, though, is that both of these women are penalized for choosing either way of life: promiscuous or virtuous. However, Nazo receives punishment for her overt ambitiousness in the form of extreme sexual violence. This raises serious questions regarding the difference between using one’s body for social and political gains, and getting battered sexually, physically and psychologically, as a means of punishment. There are various instances in the novel where Nazo exposes her body to sexual predators while acting as Rani’s body double and her substitute. For instance, she willingly has sex with Rani’s corrupt and sexually depraved husband only to prevent Rani from having to put up with him and thereby compelling her to focus on her political career. She repeats the same strategy when she throws herself into an open sexual confrontation with a group of drunken military officers. The character blatantly fools them into thinking that they are having sex with Rani when in fact they are in fact being hoodwinked by Nazo in her stead in exchange, again, for political favours for Rani. These forms of the employment of erotics seemingly appear as exploitative as getting raped against one’s will.

Looking from the perspective of the second wave of feminism, however, one may not disregard the transactional nature of these sexual encounters. These sexual acts may be categorized as empowering in the sense that Nazo engages in them out of her own volition and remains in control of the situation throughout the acts. Secondly, she also gets substantial political benefits because of these bodily transactions and in this way these turn out to be useful to her politically. Therefore, the use of erotics by her own personal will may be viewed as a currency that grants her subjectivity. It is what that makes her a free agent who has the authority to change the course of her life in the way she deems appropriate. This view of the use of sex as a means to assert agency is in line with the concept of sex-positive feminism in the sex wave. According to the pro-prostitution feminist activist, Sarah Bromberg, the negative view of prostitution “from a political theory that is over-verbalized, generalized, and too often uses stereotypical notions of what a prostitute is. The radical feminist views are ... not always delineated sufficiently to support a credible theory that prostitution degrades all women”. Keeping view in mind, we may assert that Nazo’s selling of her body to male, sexual predators in return for social and political favours may be deemed as act of empowerment rather than an instance of sheer degradation and exploitation.

At this point in the essay, we would like to point out the pitfalls associated with the above line of argument. Viewing sexual abuse in a framework of female empowerment poses the risk of justifying and even glorifying gender-based violence. For example, the instance of rape that is orchestrated by Rani, who by then has become a prime minister, and her husband to put Nazo back in her

place is an act of sexual violence against Nazo. She lies “battered and bruised, shattered to the bones”, her “spirit” is “crushed” and her “body humiliated” as a result of this sexual violence upon her body (2017, p (339). This violence dispossesses her not only of her agency but also of her sanity as well. In fact, this reveals how the body of the sexually and politically deviant person such as Nazo is becomes an “object of anxiety” for the existing power structures that are in place in society (Douglas, 2002, p. 172). Therefore, codes of restriction are enacted on the body of the protagonist, in this case, to “integrate the individual with the social system” (173). In fact, this may be perceived as the revenge of the phallus upon Nazo for trying to make her way forcibly into the symbolic order where she does not belong. this chastising by the symbolic order into Nazo’s personality leaves her “shattered” and she wishes to “leave [her] body which indicates a sense of abandonment towards her own body as well (339).

She experienced a loss of selfhood and as a result is plunged into schizophrenia. She starts seeing the General reincarnated in the form of insects and this drives her further into madness. One may say that Nazo is forced to take refuge in the Kristevan ‘semiotic’ after being disciplined by the ‘symbolic’ for questioning principles. Moi points out that “the semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes” (1995, p. 160). The “basic pulsions” of the ‘semiotics’ undergo a significant repression once an individual enters the Lacanian symbolic order. The closer an individual is to the symbolic order, the farther away they may be from these ‘pulsions’ of the pre-Oedipal stage. Nazo’s losing of her sense of self and giving in to Kristevan ‘pulsions’ show her marginalisation further exacerbated by her employment of the erotics. Her reliance on the erotics leads to her divorce from the symbolic and her subsequent entry into the semiotics.

Contrary to this idea of using the erotic as powerful tool of subversion, it also begs the question whether this employment of body for political gains may really be deemed as empowering for Nazo. This is because Nazo seems to compromise over her bodily agency as well as her sanity in order to safeguard Rani’s on multiple occasions. Here, one may point out that giving up autonomy over her body by using the erotic, Nazo may simply be seen as a pawn in the hands of a much more politically privileged woman who exploits her for her own benefit. Simone de Beauvoir (2003), sheds light on the role of prostitutes in the male-dominated societies in the following words:

[I]t has been often remarked that the necessity exists of sacrificing one part of the female sex in order to save the other and prevent worse troubles. The prostitute is a scapegoat; man vents his turpitude upon her, and he rejects her. Whether she is put legally under police supervision or works illegally in secret, she is in any case treated as a pariah. (pp. 568-9)

Lastly, as far as the analysis of this work is concerned, we would like to discuss Rani’s continued betrayal to Nazo for her personal and political gains. Rani is depicted as a woman who enjoys a homosexual relationship with Nazo but is consistently ashamed of it since it does not conform to the society’s view of sexuality. She not only continuously exploits her politically but also uses sexual violence as a tool to punish her for her agency. Rani strategically uses rape as a weapon against Nazo to discipline her. Therefore, she makes a mockery of her political ideals of women empowerment and education for girls by practising traditional patriarchal ways of sexuality by getting married etc. In addition to this, she also perpetrates rape as a tool of authoritarianism against Nazo to stress her centralized position in the symbolic order. Thus her fight for democracy as a woman against the patriarchal dictatorship seems like an absurd one since she provides herself as

a vessel for the continual perpetuation of the same phallogocentric authoritarian structures that she once stands against. The following lines in Audre Lorde's (1993), famous essay "The Master's Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" may be used to criticize above-described patriarchal practices employed by women:

The master's tool will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is threatening to those women who still the master's house as their only source of support. (p. 120)

Rani's character wins the desired space for herself in the power apparatus, yet it comes at a price of self-negation and self-abnegation. She represses her sexual desire for Nazo in order to be assimilated in the male-ordered society that she exists in. As Elisa Glick (2000), raises question on the simplistic views of sex-positive activists on female sexual transgressions by pointing out that "by ranking sexual practices in terms of their subversiveness, pro-sex activists repeat the logic of radical feminism with one distinction: they valorise the transgression of 'female sexuality' instead of its consolidation and expression (p. 21). Moreover, Nazo's death in the end of the narrative and Rani's survival actually shows the perpetuation of the established order and a failure of an individual to break it apart.

Sexual Transgressions and Repression in Hijabistan

Sabyn Javeri's second book, *Hijabistan*, is a collection of short stories and it also deals with the issue of erotics with regards to several of its female characters. We have selected four stories for analysis in this paper. In this section of the paper, we attempt to explore the distinct relationships that different characters in these short stories seem to enjoy with the erotics. We also discuss how these characters appear to employ this sexual desire and the force originating from it in various different ways and contexts. Since each short story in this collection has a different plot and characters, the analysis is likely to be diverse and multi-faceted, albeit linked to the same theme of eroticism.

The first short story, titled "The Date" in the collection, deals with a young woman belonging to the lower middle class and working for a company of some sort. The story emphasizes on the sexual relationship that this woman has with her employer in return for receiving multiple "gifts" from him (2017, p. 3). The female protagonist refers to their subsequent sexual encounter as "transaction". This also sheds light on the way she views these exchanges. In the beginning, the narrator foregrounds the character's unprivileged economic status that actually paves the way for these transactional encounters to occur in the first place. This presented to the reader from the perspective of the male employer of the girl:

He seemed to be guessing her reaction. Given her non-designer cotton shalwar-kameez with the white chiffon dupatta wound loosely around her hennaed hair and patchy bleached skin, whitened unevenly by local fairness creams, he seemed confident that she would accept his proposition. (2017, p. 3)

This makes the reader aware of the traditional and culturally accepted view of such sexually transactional encounters between individuals. However, Javeri contrasts with the way the main character looks at her relationship with the employer. The narrator describes that the girl "looked away, a dizzying wave overcoming her. What surprised her was not guilt, but the lack of it. Why wasn't she revolted? Where was the disgust? Instead, she felt a prick of excitement, as if she was about to embark on a thrilling adventure" (2017, p. 4). The emphasis on the lack of guilt shows

that the woman is excited and thrilled to explore the erotics as a possible means of obtaining power.

The conversation that takes place between the two characters demands analysis because the man, representing the patriarchal social norms, asks the woman questions regarding the way she chooses to maintain her body. He asserts that "it is not pious" to have pubic hair as instructed by the religion (2017, p. 8). This seems to be a satire on the double standards of patriarchy erected in society and their imposition on women only. The employer fails to take into consideration his own impious and illicit sexual act, according to the doctrines of his religion, but makes sure to use religion to criticise and police a woman's body. It seems as if for him the rules of religion exist only to be imposed on women in order their bodies and behaviour. The response of the woman to this unsolicited opinion on her body and her morality again stresses on the way she looks at man-made standard of propriety:

She threw back her head and laughed so loudly that for a moment he felt frightened of this little creature that had let out a laugh as ferocious as a lion's roar. He was reminded of the time when, once, he had taken his kids to the zoo and they had seen a lioness open her mouth and yawn. It had seemed to him like some sort of soundless laugh and he felt in that moment as if he were being mocked. He felt it again now, with her uproarious laughter ringing in the tiny room. (2017, p. 9)

The reiteration of the laughter reminds one of the famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Helene Cixous (2009). Here too the character seems to be laughing in the face of overbearing notions of morality and posing a challenge to patriarchy and male-centred religious ideology at the same time. The fact that the employer takes it as a personal affront and feels "mocked" shows how he consciously uses religion to in an attempt to shame the woman while deviating from it himself at the same time.

The second story in the collection, "The Urge", deals with a pre-pubescent eleven years old girl's transition into a woman, her "passage into womanhood" (2017, p. 14). One may think that it highlights the stigma and shame associated with being a woman, or more specifically, becoming one in this case. Javeri, however, takes a nuanced stance on this and presents it as something exciting and even empowering for her female characters. However, there is an evident tussle between the character's burgeoning sexuality and restrictions that patriarchy imposes on her body. The first person narrator reflects on the event of her becoming a woman and the society's reaction to it. She thinks that "now that [she] was older, [she] must wear a hijab. And an abaya too. [she] must be good. A good Muslim. A good, Muslim, woman. . . . [She] had just turned thirteen" (2017, p. 14). This imposition of a dress code on a girl who has not yet become an adult shows the intrusive nature of the patriarchal society of the story. The context in which the character has been posited seems to be a highly confining and constrictive one as two forms of ideology namely religion and patriarchy seem to join hands with each other to suppress the female subjectivity. Therefore, whatever subversion we may anticipate from the character will be a defiance of both the above-mentioned forms of ideological controls.

The first response that the girl exhibits towards the imposition of the abaya is the acknowledgement of the erasure of identity that she has been subjected to. At first, she feels "hidden" (2017, p. 15) under the bulk of "the cumbersome garment" (2017, p. 18), but then she starts associating something quite sensuous and erotic with the material of the cloth:

I fingered the silky material of the abaya. It was smooth, like the chocolates an uncle had once brought us from

Jeddah. . . . I don't know why but I felt a sudden pang. The smoothness of the fabric was sensuous. It seemed as if this thing really did have chocolates woven into its texture. I had a sudden urge to taste it. (2017, p. 15)

This passage has apparent sexual overtones to it. It seems unusual to associate something that is regarded as means to bulwark female sexual desire and to constraint her body is shown to be eliciting an erotic response from the character. Here the narrator has attempted to subvert the traditional meaning and purpose of the abaya by making it a signifier of something exactly opposite of it. The girl enjoys "the freedom that the abaya offer[s]" (2017, p. 17). This may be viewed as one of the deconstructed strategies that the writer has employed in order to challenge the male-dominated power structure of society.

Similarly, the girl is shown to be gravitated towards the red lipstick she comes across "at the mall by the sea" (2017, p. 19). She marvels the lipstick's "power of transformation" and also manages to steal it by hiding it under her abaya. In this way, the abaya again provides her with a means of resistance to the authority. The red lipstick, on the other hand, gives her the opportunity to celebrate her own body. She feels "seduced" by "the red devil" (2017, p. 20). Here the red lipstick may even be perceived as a metaphor for the Phallus. The girl's fascination for it, then, may be read as her desire for the exploration of the realm of the Phallus and her right to it. She undertakes this exploration of the lipstick and by extension her subjectivity behind the closed doors of a washroom and is denied privacy by her intruding family even there. This again shows the conflicting interplay of forces between the censorial powers of the heteronormative society and the girl's personal desire to become a subject.

Continuing with her overt sexual (mis)behaviour, the girl engages in "the ritual" of "flashing" her body parts from the rooftop of the house to a shopkeeper that catches her fancy (2017, p. 25). Again, one can observe the employment of the erotics for the expression of desire and will. However, this leads to her marriage which proves to be as oppressive as the abaya that the girl has had to don before. Her husband begins to lock her up every morning before leaving for work since he is afraid she might "flash somebody else" (26). The confinement even continues throughout her pregnancy and subsequently results into postpartum depression and infanticide by the girl. This constant oscillation between empowerment and disempowerment poses an affront to the idea of the employment of the erotics by women for securing a place in the symbolic order.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper discusses the employment of the erotics by the female characters of Sabyn Javeri's fiction as a way to subvert hetero-normative patriarchal authority. We analyse how these characters use their libidinal desires as a source of energy in order to challenge the socio-political hierarchy in which they are immersed. However, relying on the erotics as an authentic means of subversion may be problematic since it places the female

characters in the twofold opposition to religious and patriarchal ideology in the socio-political contexts of the fictional worlds.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

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