

**CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS SHAPING FEMALE
SOLIDARITY AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY IN *THE PEARL THAT
BROKE ITS SHELL* AND *THE HENNA ARTIST***

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Abstract

*The current study paper explores the role of cultural and historical contexts in defining female solidarity as a survival measure in Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and Joshi's *The Henna Artist*. The novels are set in the context of patriarchal societies of Afghanistan and the post-independence India, where women are limited in their lives by strict gender roles, socio-historical trauma, and institutionalized male domination. Based on the concepts of Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), this paper holds that female solidarity in both works is not an alternative kind of sisterhood but a culturally constructed and historically necessary survival mechanism. By means of thorough textual analysis and interaction with the feminist literature, the article shows how combined oppression, intergenerational memory, and enforced silence dictated by culture make women establish bonds that allow them to survive, resist minimally, and be resilient. The results question individualistic theories about empowerment, and foreground solidarity, which is a structurally determined reaction to patriarchy.*

Keywords: *Female solidarity, survival strategy, cultural context, historical oppression, radical feminism, feminist discourse analysis*

INTRODUCTION

In patriarchal societies, cultural practices and historical conditions dictate the lives of women and control their bodies, voices, and decisions. In these situations, individual resistance may not be important as opposed to the collective endurance. The issue of women's bonds as major zones of support, defiance, and survival is reiterated again and again in contemporary South Asian and Middle Eastern women's fiction. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (Hashimi, 2014) and *The Henna Artist* (Joshi, 2020) are examples of the given tendency since they portray the empowerment of women who become powerful through solidarity, instead of individualism. Both novels are so entrenched in certain socio-historical realities: the long history of warfare in Afghanistan, gender segregation, and institutionalized violence, and the postcolonial Indian fight between tradition and modernity. In such settings, women are marginalised systematically in ways that make formal

means of protection unavailable. Consequently, female solidarity is an inevitable survival mechanism and not a love affair or ideological decision. The research question, which is discussed in this article, is as follows: What cultural and historical contexts cause the formation of female solidarity as a survival mechanism in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist*? The paper presents the role of solidarity as a reaction to structural oppression by locating female relationships in the context of their wider cultural and historical contexts. The article provides a comparative reading using Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis, which predicts collective endurance instead of individual empowerment.

Problem Statement

Despite a growing body of feminist literary scholarship on women's oppression and resistance, female solidarity is often treated as a secondary, emotional, or incidental theme rather than as a structured survival strategy shaped by cultural and historical forces. Much of the existing research prioritises individual female agency or isolated acts of defiance, thereby overlooking how women collectively negotiate patriarchal constraints through intergenerational support, silence, mentorship, and shared cultural knowledge. In the context of Afghan and Indian women's fiction, particularly Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and Alka Joshi's *The Henna Artist*, there remains limited critical engagement with the ways socio-historical conditions actively produce and sustain female solidarity as a necessary mechanism of endurance. This absence restricts a fuller understanding of collective female resilience within patriarchal societies.

Research Gap

The gap lies in the limited feminist literary scholarship that systematically analyses female solidarity as a culturally and historically constructed survival mechanism rather than treating it as a marginal, emotional, or supplementary aspect of women's narratives.

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to examine the role of female solidarity as a survival mechanism based on cultural and historical situations in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist*.

Research Questions

1. What cultural and historical contexts lead to the development of female solidarity as a survival strategy in the selected texts?
2. How do cultural and historical contexts influence the formation, function, and sustainability of female solidarity in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist*?

Research Objectives

1. The cultural and historical contexts that led to the development of female solidarity as a survival strategy in the selected texts
2. The cultural and historical contexts influence the formation, function, and sustainability of female solidarity in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist*.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant as it disrupts the feminist discourses of liberalism that emphasize the agency and autonomy of individuals. Through solidarity as a survival strategy that is culturally

and historically predetermined, the article emphasizes the collectivity of the resistance of women. The research makes a contribution to feminist literary studies by providing an insight into how women bargain for survival in oppressive socio-cultural systems, especially in South Asian and Middle Eastern societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Comprehensions of Feminine Solidarity

Women solidarity has taken the center stage in feminist theory especially in the discourses that transcend individualistic concepts of empowerment. According to early feminist theorists, women solidarity is organised based on common material and social circumstances and not on emotional closeness; hook (2000) theorises that real sisterhood is made based on resistance and not presumed homogeneity. This insight plays a key role in the analysis of the literary representations where solidarity is developed due to the condition of coercion. Mohanty (2003) also makes the concept of female solidarity even more tricky by advising that the experiences of women should not be generalised across cultures. She posits that the resistance and bonding of women should be interpreted in certain historical, cultural and political contexts. This point of view is especially applicable to *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist* because the two writings are entrenched in the non-Western socio-cultural systems where survival is more reliant on conformity than on resistance. The work by Mohanty gives a critical approach to the concept of solidarity as situational, instead of ideologically homogenous. The radical feminist theorists find the need to have female solidarity in structural patriarchy. According to Firestone (1970) and Millett (1977), patriarchy is an institution that is manifested in family, marriage, and culture making women subordinate as a group. In these systems, solidarity is a survival mechanism to systemic domination. Walby (1990) adds to this argument by pinpointing patriarchy as a combination of interconnected structures (economic, cultural and ideological) which constrain the autonomy of women. It is on these lessons that solidarity can be read in fiction as a response to structural limitations and not an individual decision.

Patriarchy, Cultural Context, and Women Survival

Historians who study the life of women in South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures always give importance to the role of culture in controlling female behaviour. Ahmed (1992) investigates the role of cultural traditions which are usually presented as religious compulsions in restricting women movements, sexuality, and speech. Her writing brings to the fore the manner in which women establish informal support networks within the oppressive cultural structures through solidarity as survival and not resistance. The idea of the patriarchal bargain introduced by Kandiyoti (1988) is especially important to this research. She puts forward the argument that women in a patriarchal system develop survival mechanisms by identifying with some roles or association with which they have a relative security. In this context, female solidarity is a strategic adjustment which enables women to bargain with limited power without stepping outside the boundaries that are culturally approved. This theoretical observation clearly directs the interpretation of both novels by Hashimi and Joshi, in which women depend on each other to

endure subjugating domestic and social forces. Research about the lived experiences of Afghan women points to the cumulative nature of war, political instabilities and gender segregation. Humanitarian and feminist scholarship records how the decades of war have made the suffering of women natural and at the same time enhanced the inter-generational female relationships (Dupree, 2002; Rostami-Povey, 2007). These works are important historical backgrounds of *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, in which the solidarity of women is strongly connected to the shared trauma and inherited suffering. In the same way, postcolonial Indian society scholarship shows that gender hierarchies are still present despite political autonomy. According to Chatterjee (1993), women were frequently pushed to the domestic arena by nationalist discourse and romanticised as the carriers of cultural heritage. This historical position focuses on constraining the agency of women and promoting the existence of private female networks as emotional and practical support. This contextualises *The Henna Artist*, where women find their way in the context of tradition and modernity in subtle, solidarity-based ways.

Female Solidarity in Literary Studies

Female solidarity is another theme that literary critics have discussed more and more frequently in women writing in marginalised situations. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) believe that collective resistance is often prefigured in the literature of women since heroic individualism is not always the case. Such an attitude puts a strain on standard literary paradigms that emphasize solitary characters and focus on the relational survival instead. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* has been critically read focusing on its depiction of female suffering and strength across generations. Researchers observe that through the use of two women to narrate the story, Hashimi uses the recurring theme of oppression to shape the life of women, thus supporting solidarity as a historical requirement (Rahimi, 2017). The focus on collective survival instead of escape in the novel is consistent with the feminist readings that focus on collective survival. *The Henna Artist* is often criticized on the topic of female agency, entrepreneurship, and self-definition (Sharma, 2021). Nevertheless, new scholarship recognizes that the relative autonomy of Lakshmi is maintained by a web of women who provide both emotional, social and practical assistance. These works indicate that the concept of individual empowerment in the novel cannot be separated and supported by the collective female support. In spite of this emerging literature, there is little scholarship that directly deals with female solidarity as a survival mechanism that is conditioned by cultural and historical compulsion. The majority of research studies consider solidarity as an aide in the background but not in the analysis.

The gap highlights the need for a sustained comparative analysis that anticipates solidarity as a structurally generated phenomenon. Although the existence of female solidarity has been accepted in feminist theory and literary criticism, little has been done to explain the cultural and historical inevitability of the same in non-Western settings. Literature tends to idealise the connections that women have or rather put them as moral decisions instead of survival strategies. Additionally, there are limited comparative analyses of South Asian and Middle Eastern texts that employ a common feminist approach. This research fills these gaps by placing female solidarity in a definite

cultural and historical context and examining it as a survival need but not an idealised sisterhood. The research, by uniting *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist* offers a subtle, context-specific feminist reading that predicts group survival instead of individual freedom.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used in this study is a qualitative, interpretive research design that is based on feminist literary analysis. The qualitative method is especially appropriate to analyze literary works that touch upon such complicated social issues as patriarchy, gendered oppression, and female solidarity. The research does not aim at quantifying variables or testing hypotheses but interpreting meanings, patterns, and representations within narrative frameworks, character relationships, and discursive practices.

The main objective is to comprehend the process and reason of female solidarity as a survival strategy in certain cultural and historical circumstances. This interpretive design will enable the study to go past the superficial identification of thematic issues and proceed to undertake a thorough investigation of the text. The study analyzes the way literature reflects, reproduces, and criticizes the patriarchal power structures by placing the novels in their socio-historical contexts. This method is consistent with the feminist literature scholarship which sees literary texts as artefacts that have been culturally produced based on ideological, historically and socially formed social relations.

Research Approach: Feminist Qualitative Textual Analysis

The research method used in the study is the feminist qualitative textual analysis. Feminist textual analysis puts the experience, voices, and relations of women at the centre and questions the power structures that marginalise them. It is especially interested in the functioning of gender in the texts in terms of representation, silence, and emphasis of the narrative (Lazar, 2005). The feminist analysis of the study is applied to the analysis of the ways women can be influenced by the patriarchal norm and the ways women's solidarity may be viewed as a reaction to systemic oppression.

The method denies the neutral or universal interpretation of the texts and instead prefigures gender as a key category of interpretation. This makes sure that female ties are not regarded as marginal subplots but as the primary survival mechanisms. The approach is qualitative and, therefore, flexible and deep. The passages are not chosen according to frequency or prominence, but according to relevance to the research question. This allows one to closely read the instances in which solidarity comes in the form of silence, common forms of suffering or even in understanding one another.

The research data is in the form of textual excerpts obtained from the primary novels. Passages were chosen according to their topicality to the themes of cultural restraint, historical trauma, silence, and female attachment. The excerpts act as qualitative data in which the research question is examined. The analysis is underpinned and placed in context using secondary sources such as feminist theoretical writings and academic critique.

Theoretical Framework

The research is based on the feminist theory and, in particular, on Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) as complementary analytical theories. A combination of these methods contributes to the structural, context-sensitive analysis of female solidarity as a survival technique that is formed by cultural and historical processes and not by personal choice. It is the framework that enables the analysis to leave behind the character-based interpretation level and question the systems, discourses, and institutions that require women to have collective bonds in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist*.

Radical Feminism: Patriarchy, Structure, and Collective Survival

The conceptualisation of radical feminism views patriarchy as a system of power that is very widespread and deeply rooted among all the social relations, institutions, and practices (Millett, 1977; Firestone, 1970). In contrast to the views of liberal feminism that aim at legal reform and individual rights, radical feminism finds the origin of women's oppression in the very sources of society, family, marriage, sexuality, and cultural norms. In this sense, the subordination of women is not incidental, situational, but instead systematic and historical.

Radical feminism, in relation to this paper, is an important way of viewing the reality behind the development of female solidarity as a survival strategy. When patriarchy is institutionalized and women are systematically denied their autonomy, safety and voice, personal resistance is either inadequate or risky. Female collectives will thus serve as alternative support systems that are substitutes to the lack or animosity of patriarchal institutions. This theorisation of patriarchy by Walby (1990) as a system of interrelated structures is especially applicable. She singles out six major structures, namely paid work, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and state all of which control the lives of women. These structures overlap in both novels being studied to produce circumstances of utter vulnerability to women. Marriage denies freedom, culture dictates silence and violence punishes female bodies. In this kind of system, the connection between women is not a choice; it is a need to survive psychologically, emotionally, and even physically. Notably, shared material conditions among women are also a precursor of solidarity that radical feminism predicts. According to hooks (2000), sisterhood is not presumed to be similar, but rather created by shared struggle. This observation is the main focus of the current paper as it interprets female solidarity as a product of collective oppression and not emotional bonding. The novels reveal that women do not connect because they want to have friends, but because they have to survive in a patriarchy, which means that they must endure together.

Feminist Discourse Analysis: Language, Silence, and Power

Although radical feminism gives us a structural interpretation of suppression, Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) provides a methodological perspective on how patriarchy works out in terms of language, silence, and narrative representation. According to Lazar (2005), the FDA refers to a method that questions the way gendered power relations are constructed, preserved, and contested by means of discourse. In literature, discourse is more inclusive of dialogue and narrative voice, silences, metaphors, and representational patterns as well.

FDA is especially applicable to the present research since both novels describe a world where the speech of women is censored, and the silence is imposed by the culture. Instead of regarding silence as non-existence, the FDA allows the analysis to perceive silence as a discursive action guided by power. The internalisation of patriarchal norms is demonstrated in the way women are not able to voice their stance, speak freely on violence, desire, or injustice. Yet even the collective silence of women turns into a kind of communication bringing together by mutual understanding.

Integrating Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis

Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis can be integrated to enable a thorough study of the female solidarity as a structurally-driven phenomenon and discursively-constituted one. Radical feminism offers the reasons why solidarity is necessary; why the survival of women is systematically sabotaged by patriarchy; and why FDA offers an explanation of how solidarity works; through language, silence, and narrative practice. All these structures combined make sure that female solidarity is not romanticised or depoliticised. Rather, it is interpreted as a culturally created reaction to the past oppression. This fusion method is in line with the main thesis of the study that solidarity in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and *The Henna Artist* serves as a survival tactic that is influenced by the patriarchal culture, historical trauma, and discursive regulation. By employing these frameworks, the study positions female bonds as acts of collective endurance that challenge patriarchal isolation, even when they do not result in overt rebellion. The theoretical framework thus provides a robust foundation for analysing how women survive and resist within oppressive socio-cultural systems.

ANALYSIS

The analysis section that follows is an in-depth examination of the role of female solidarity as a survival strategy in the socio-cultural and historical setting as described in both *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by Hashimi and *The Henna Artist* by Joshi. It looks into the way women live due to patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and historical traumas and require collective support. Through the application of Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis, the analysis examines both structural and discursive aspects of female relationships and also how women communicate, mentor and protect each other within spaces that limit autonomy and voice. The thematic discussion presented in this introductory overview preconditions a more detailed discussion of the various aspects of female solidarity, which proves to be adaptive, strategic, and long-term in essence.

Cultural Norms and Patriarchal Constraints

Women in both novels are governed by their cultures in very deep and restrictive ways. In *the Pearl That Broke its Shell*, the Afghan culture, including purdah and early and often forced marriage imprison women both physically and socially. Rahima observes, “*A woman’s honour lives behind walls, in spaces she cannot choose*” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 112), which highlights the constraints of cultural requirements to dictate movement and actions. These limitations do not simply deter choice; they create circumstances in which women have to depend on each other to be guided, safeguarded, and emotionally supported.

Similarly, in *The Henna Artist*, Lakshmi and other women are limited by societal norms on obedience, marriage, and propriety. Lakshmi reflects, “*A good wife learns to endure quietly; speaking too much brings only trouble*” (Joshi, 2020, p. 64). Cultural regulations do not just govern speech, but also behaviour, creating conditions in which female networks are the sole arena in which agency is negotiated. Such instances can be associated with Radical Feminism, which assumes that the system of patriarchy is an institutional framework and not a personal or contingent process. Through depicting structural control, the novels demonstrate why female solidarity is required and not a choice.

Women learn and exchange ways of sharing how to manage such norms through close observation of their day-to-day lives. As an example, the mother of Rahima educates her daughter on how to communicate safely and to find support among older women: “*My mother’s warnings were lessons, each word a shield in a world designed to confine me*” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 156). In her novel, Joshi demonstrates how elderly women teach Lakshmi how to act and negotiate, and how to live in a world controlled by men: “*The world sees what it wants, but women teach each other what it does not*” (Joshi, 2020, p. 145). In both cases, it is shown that cultural control requires women to resort to one another to survive.

Historical Trauma and Intergenerational Memory

The cultural norms exert the pressures that are increased by historical events. Women experience trauma and marginalisation because of the long-term wars and instability in Afghanistan. Hashimi depicts this by the family of Rahima: “*My mother’s life was a warning written into my own; the walls of our home held stories of loss, and silence taught lessons no school could offer*” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 189). Trauma is not individual but generational and community becomes a means in which resilience is transferred to the generations.

In *The Henna Artist*, post-independent India has another historical setting but the same tendencies of restraint. Despite the political environment that ensures modernity, gender inequalities are still fixed. The role of older women in mentoring Lakshmi presents the idea of how the historical knowledge and survival skills are passed down: “*Grandmothers and mothers whisper truths that the world would rather hide, guiding us in ways words alone cannot convey*” (Joshi, 2020, p. 212). The two novels employ intergenerational memory to demonstrate that solidarity is nurtured by history awareness and by the need to survive.

These stories, through the FDA, demonstrate how the silences of women codify the past. The inability of women to express themselves freely about oppression turns into a collective discursive act, which strengthens their ties and enables them to survive in the environment of consistent socio-political pressure.

Silence, Communication, and Subversive Bonding

Silence turns out to be a limitation and a means of solidarity. In the work by Hashimi, women express themselves in a way that is indirect and they make use of gestures, codes and unspoken understanding. Rahima notes, “*We spoke without words; our eyes carried the stories our lips could*

not” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 221). FDA assists in interpreting such silences as strategic and not passive: they are a tactical way of communicating that maintains safety and builds solidarity.

Lakshmi, in the novel by Joshi, maneuvers through the dialogues with other women, being very discreet, sharing secrets yet keeping them out of reach of others: “*We spoke in half-words, in glances and gestures, our true meanings tucked safely away from prying eyes*” (Joshi, 2020, p. 198). In this case, solidarity is implemented on the basis of common sense that flourishes in the loopholes of patriarchal rule.

These instances reveal that female relationships are discursively held together, giving a survival mechanism in societies that are proactive in restricting female voices. The silence and coded language are thus very important features of female solidarity as they prove the duality of oppression and resistance.

Survival Strategies Through Solidarity

Women solidarity works in emotional, practical and social levels. Women offer emotional support to one another, lamentation, and validation of the socially repressed experiences. Socially, networks provide instructions on how to deal with the cultural expectations and legal or family restrictions. In practice, women pool resources, mutually defend themselves against violence, and train younger women on survival skills. For instance, Rahima In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, uses the help of other women to find her way through the family expectations and political unrest: “*We held each other up when the world seemed intent on crushing us*” (Hashimi, 2014, p. 245). In *The Henna Artist*, Lakshmi is not only supported by her clients and female colleagues in terms of business but also in terms of safety nets in a male-dominated marketplace: “*Without them, I would have been alone in a world that watches, judges, and punishes women too quickly*” (Joshi, 2020, p. 304).

These are some examples that solidarity is not sentimental, but strategic. It is a necessity that makes it possible to survive in structural oppression. It is group, responsive, and contextual, which supports the main argument of the study that female relationships are survival tactics influenced by cultural and historical facts.

Intersectional Differences and Comparative Insights

Although both novels depict comparable roles of solidarity, the specifics of female bonding are influenced by differences in the cultural and historical context. War and political instability in Afghanistan heighten the stakes of silence and secrecy, whilst social mobility and entrepreneurship in post-independence India determine the forms and opportunities of solidarity. Nevertheless, the social forces that require solidarity are similar: patriarchal dominance, the prohibition of sociality, and the historical trauma drive women to unite. The comparative approach highlights the point that the concept of female solidarity is not universal in its form but universal in its functions: it is what keeps women alive in the presence of systemic oppression, regardless of how different the cultures are. Radical Feminism justifies the structural need, whereas the FDA sheds light on the discursive activities through which solidarity can work in various societies.

Findings

In response to Research Question 1, the study revealed that gender norms and social expectations that are imposed by a particular culture are decisive factors in influencing female solidarity as a survival measure. In both novels, the patriarchal cultural order, including the limitation of women's movement, silence concerning the sufferings of women, and strict demands of obedience, provides situations in which women have to depend on each other to survive emotionally, socially, and practically. Solidarity among women does not appear as a voluntary and emotional connection but as a culturally predetermined reaction to the exclusion of women by the system. The discussion reveals that it is because the dominant cultural systems deprive women of formal power and voice that women create similar codes of communication, systems of mutual protection, and informal support networks.

In response to Research Question 2, the study revealed that historical conditions play a very important role in the development and maintenance of female solidarity in the two texts. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, the long-term conflict, political instability and historical trauma reinforce the dependence of women on collective support and solidarity is entrenched in the survival strategies transmitted through history. The socio-historical realities of post-independence India, even with its progressive and modern narratives, still dictate the lives of women through set gender hierarchies, and thus force women to form enduring and stable networks. The results show that historical pressures are not just contextualising the experience of women, but they actively support solidarity as a long-term and adaptive reaction to patriarchal conditions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that female solidarity in Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* and Joshi's *The Henna Artist* operates as a crucial survival strategy shaped by cultural and historical contexts. In its detailed analysis, we can see that the connection between women is not accidental or simply emotional, but it is organized in reaction to systemic oppression and patriarchal domination. These networks are necessitated by cultural norms, past trauma, and social constraints, which allow women to survive, communicate, and maneuver in spaces where there is a lack of autonomy and safety.

Through the novels, solidarity takes various forms such as intergenerational mentoring, emotional support, coded communication, and even practical collaboration. Such ties enable women to retain knowledge, defend each other, and maintain the strength of the generation. The differences in socio-historical context between Afghanistan and post-independence India do not influence the forms and expressions of solidarity, but the underlying role is the same, which is the collective endurance of patriarchal domination.

Through Radical Feminism and Feminist Discourse Analysis, the paper unveils the structural and discursive aspects of female solidarity. Radical Feminism justifies the need to act in groups in oppressive systems, and the FDA provides insights into how women communicate, resist, and support each other using language, silence, and narrative practice. These frameworks collectively give a detailed insight into solidarity as an adaptive and strategic reaction to gendered oppression.

Finally, this study shows that the phenomenon of female bonds cannot be perceived solely as a personal or cultural phenomenon, but as a phenomenon that is closely connected with structural inequalities and historical conditions. The acknowledgement of solidarity as a survival mechanism expands the feminist perception of female strength, which underlines the value of collective survival as a key element of empowerment in oppressive socio-cultural structures.

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