

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Men and women are equally significant regarding contribution to the development of their families as well as of society. Nevertheless, gender inequality is one of the major issues of any women's movement all over the world seek to tackle, as it is global phenomena that exist in almost all countries of the world. These include Pakistan, which society has pronouncedly accustomed to the system of patriarchy and thus established hierarchal gender relations to the extent that men have control over women (Chauhan, 2014, p. 26). Based on Global Gender Gap Report 2018, Pakistan ranks 148<sup>th</sup> out of 149 countries—the second-worst country in the world regarding gender inequality (World Economic Forum, 2018, p. 215). Although Article 25 of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan states: “All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex. Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the protection of women and children”, in practice, women are susceptible to be oppressed due to the pervasiveness of discrimination.

In Pakistan, the birth of a daughter is often mourned while the birth of a son is being celebrated. During the adolescent years, girls are treated with less good nutritious food as compared to boys and their education is not desired by the parents or is limited to village-level schooling, while boys are encouraged to pursue an education at village-level schooling or even sent to a good school in other cities or

abroad (Shah and Baporikar, 2013, pp. 88-90). The discrimination then continues to the stage of adulthood, when the ideology of sexual division of labor occurs. Women are responsible for the reproductive roles as mothers and wives in the private arena of home, while men are responsible for the productive role as breadwinners in the public arena. Apart from that, women are also subject to restrictions; their mobility is controlled through the system of *purdah* (literally “veiled”), which takes two forms: physical segregation of the sexes and the requirement of covering their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their bodily shape (Bari and Pal, 2000, p. 2). The recurring oppressive treatments towards women that conventionally practiced become the root causes of the augmentation of social problems in Pakistan. For instance, Pakistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, which is recorded at 59%; less than 47% of women being literate and more than 71% of men (UNESCO, 2017). In addition, based on a study conducted by Zahidie and Jamali (2013)—which examined 20 published sources regarding depression among Pakistani women—they discover that women in Pakistan are susceptible to face a high burden of depressive disorders due to marriage related issues, domestic violence, verbal or physical abuse by in-laws, stressful life and poor social conditions (pp. 576-577).

The corresponding issue of oppressed Pakistani women who eventually strive for empowerment is depicted in Aisha Saeed’s middle-grade novel, *Amal Unbound*. Amal—the novel’s main protagonist who is very fond of reading and learning—along with her sister Seema, are forced by their father to give up on school in order to take care of their younger sisters and attend the domestic chores

after their mother becomes incapacitated due to post-partum depression. Moreover, as the eldest, Amal also has to face burdensome accountability to redeem her father's debt by working for Jawad Sahib—the son of the dominant and villainous personage in Amal's village, Khan Sahib—as a bonded laborer. A person are likely to work as a bonded laborer due to debt bondage when his/her labor is required to pay a certain loan (Malik, 2016, p. 126). Not only Amal, another female character is also the subject of this grueling practice. She is a fellow young servant named Nabila, who has been disregarded by her family because no matter how much money they spent to secure her freedom, it will never be sufficient.

Although Amal must endure the devastating reality, she does not merely give in. Through empowerment, i.e. demonstrating her intelligence, bravery and giving/receiving support for/from others, she tackles Jawad Sahib's dominance, which ultimately allows her and other female characters to break free. As stated by the author, Aisha Saeed, the story is served as a representation of countless other girls in Pakistan and around the world who take a stand against inequality and fight for justice in often unrecognized but important ways (Saeed, 2018, p. 230). This heroic and moving story captured in the novel has qualified *Amal Unbound* to become a New York Times Best Seller, listed in the 2019 Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) Notable Children's Books, the 2018 Global Read Aloud, the 2018 Best Books selection of Amazon and to receive starred reviews from Publishers Weekly and Kirkus.

As argued by an American feminist and social theorist, Patricia Hill Collins, such disadvantageous experiences are influenced by one's gender, race, social

class, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity, age, etc., which creates forms of intersecting oppressions known as intersectionality (Collins, 2000, p. 18). Collins also claims that these intersecting oppressions are originated and developed from the overall social organization of hierarchal power relations, which she theorizes as Matrix of Domination. It has a particular organization of its domain of power, namely structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. This theory, is applied to analyze how the intersecting oppressions are organized and augmented in the Pakistani society that Amal lives in. For example, the concept is embodied in the characters of Amal's father—Malik—and Jawad Sahib. In terms of Malik, he uses his authority as the head of the family to dictate Amal and Seema. As for Jawad Sahib, he exercises his hierarchal power relations that put Amal and Nabila in a disadvantageous position.

In respect of intersecting oppressions, Collins suggests that women need to establish a self-defined standpoint in order to empower themselves as individuals and as a collective through a paradigm known as Self-Definition. Essentially, it is a mechanism that allows women to cope with and tackle the oppression which is systemized by the matrix of domination. She argues that to realize a comprehensive self-defined standpoint, not only should women acknowledge their worth and build consciousness of themselves, but also get involved in social spaces that allow them to speak freely and establish bonds with other women in order to gain and provide emotional support and encouragement from one another (Collins, 2000, pp. 97-110). Thus, in analyzing how Amal strives for her own and other female characters'

empowerment as an attempt to tackle the oppression—particularly by Malik and Jawad Sahib—this theory is also applied in this study.

There have been several studies that have examined related critical issues in fiction, one of them is Sanna Dhahir's "Turning Oppression into Challenges: Women in Badriyya l-Biṣr's *Hind wa-l-'askar*" (2014), which appears on Brill's peer-reviewed journal *Arabica*. The article explores the grievances experienced by Hind, the female protagonist of *Hind wa-l-'askar* (Hind and the Soldiers) that represents women in Saudi Arabia; it focuses on women's power to use their judgment and equip themselves with the available resources in order to overcome oppression and marginalization.

The other study is by Sandra Nwokocha, which is also a scholarly article entitled "Subversive responses to oppression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" (2017). It is published on *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. In the article, Nwokocha argues that subversion, an aggressive behavior that aimed to discard patriarchal system is the significance of the female characters' responses to oppression. Through a radical feminist approach and the views of Alice Walker, Lois McNay, and Simone de Beauvoir, Nwokocha's analysis of the novel highlights the female characters' subversive behaviors in establishing female agency, and notes such resistance is necessary to challenge the oppression.

Another study is a scholarly article entitled "Responding to Patriarchy in India: Resistance and Complicity in Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*" (2018), which was written by Elizabeth Jackson and is published in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. The article examines how female

characters respond to patriarchy in two novels written by Indian women writers: Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004) and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Despite the religious and generational differences of the authors and their protagonists, both narratives suggest that patriarchy in India might be more characterized by culture instead of religion. The writer argues that Ali focuses in *Madras on Rainy Days* on the patriarchal control of female sexuality, while Desai in *Fasting, Feasting* stresses the patriarchal restrictions on female autonomy. Both novels portray older women as partisans of patriarchal system, while younger women as the victims who response to patriarchy in various manners; from the resentful resignation of Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* to the final escape of Layla in *Madras on Rainy Days*.

Unlike studies as mentioned above, this study focuses on the analysis that *Amal Unbound* explores the themes of women's oppression and women's empowerment, particularly in Pakistan. To analyze the oppression that many Pakistani women suffer from, Patricia Hill Collins's Matrix of Domination is applied, whereas the theme of empowerment as women's attempt to tackle the oppression is analyzed by applying Patricia Hill Collins's Self-Definition. Furthermore, the descriptive-analytical method is also applied to identify and describe the collected data.

## **1.2. Research Question**

How do women in *Amal Unbound* strive for empowerment in order to tackle the oppression?

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to investigate the matrix of domination that oppress Pakistani women and to understand how the self-defined standpoint would empower women as one of Pakistan's oppressed groups.

### **1.4. Scope of the Study**

To fill the gap in literature, this study focuses on the issue of women's oppression in Pakistan and empowerment as women's attempt to tackle the oppression.

### **1.5. Significance of the Study**

This study would be an input on literary criticism from the intersectional feminist perspective and a reference on the context of Pakistani society, which could raise readers' awareness about the issue of women's oppression that has been prevailing in the society. Furthermore, it would educate readers about how girls and women could take a stand against oppression and strive for empowerment by taking an example from a realistic work of fiction.