



CANVAS AND CAGE: AESTHETIC RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICS OF DOMESTIC SPACE IN HAIDER'S *A WOMAN ON A SUITCASE*

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Abstract

This research paper shows that in *A Woman on a Suitcase*, Shazaf Fatima Haider reveals the South Asian joint family as a protective outfit, but, in fact, as a panopticon, meant to watch and hinder female subjectivity. Although recent scholarship has examined the politics of Seema Hyderi reclaiming autonomy over postcolonial patriarchy, this paper takes a turn into the field of aesthetics. It also claims that visual observation and painting is not just a hobby, but a counter-spatial practice which helps Seema to leave the patriarchal cage. The study uses ecofeminist argument of the violence of extraction to explore the domestic world. In this case, the female vitality is mined to preserve the family status. The paper compares the groomed lives of such characters as Muneera, who is compared to a stunted bonsai, and Seema, who artistically creates wild roses, which have thorns. Seema in a way opposes this pruning of her identity by painting. Moreover, this study has applied an existentialistic framework on the issue of burden of choice to explain spatial mobility. It compares the agency acceptance of Seema with the bad faith of characters who are confined domestically. Muneera gives up the position of a victim, whereas Seema employs the "canvas" to re-aestheticize her physical and psychological territory. In the end, the paper hypothesizes that the real freedom of Haider in his story is reached when the female gaze is not focused on the male object anymore but redirects itself onto the painting of the outer world.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Existentialism, Female Subjectivity, South Asian Literature, Spatial Politics, Violence of Extraction*

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1. Introduction

The joint family set up has been enjoying a sacred place in the vast and complicated cartography of South Asian postcolonial literature. Conventionally, literary discourses have praised the multi-generational homestead as the citadel of cultural conservation- a sacred warehouse whereby collective identity is well protected against the disintegrative, individualistic powers of western modernity. In this context, the house is portrayed as a refuge and the role of the woman is to maintain the reputation and legacy of the family. Nevertheless, the new Anglophone fiction in Pakistan is breaking this nostalgic surface more and more often to demonstrate a darker, more claustrophobic real world. *A Woman on a Suitcase* (2024) by Shazaf Fatima Haider is acted ruthlessly into this critical tradition. It reveals the domestic world not as a place of protection, but as a complex system of surveillance and suppression. The house in Haider is a domestic panopticon, a place that is carefully planned to domesticate, monitor and eventually restrict female subjectivity.

It is the story of a young woman named Seema Hyderi, who is spirited, artistic and a bit unconventional and finds herself in a suffocating world of her in laws in Karachi. Seema is in a state of constant displacement compared to the idealistic heroines of the traditional romances who find satisfaction in domestic submission. She gets married to Momin Hyderi, who seems a modern and an educated person but is proved to be highly insecure and bound to the patriarchal scripts of his parents, Arshad (Ba Jee) and Haneen (Ma Jee). The main conflict of the novel is the conflict between the wish of Seema to her independent identity, which is reflected in her love towards painting and her need to get space and the strict conformist demands of the family of Hyderi.

This stress is not psychological alone; it is the spatial stress, which is violent. The commonest picture surrounding the novel is that of Seema sitting on her blue Samsonite suitcase who had been evicted unceremonially out of the home of her husband because of petty domestic quarrels. This expulsion ritual is a punitive measure taken by Momin to tame his wife but it unintentionally creates the circumstances under which she will rebel. The picture of the woman on the suitcase is the problematic core of the novel: it is the indicator of the discontinuity between the windowless and stagnant character of the patriarchal home, where the concept of privacy is considered a deviance, and the frightening, but liberating, world beyond.

The extended family in the novel by Haider has been portrayed as a closed ecosystem that eats up individuality to promote the overall sense of honor. This is best embodied in the character of the matriarch, Ma Jee. Although she looks loving, she only loves her on the condition of complete obedience. The philosophy of the Hyderi woman is expressed by her with the help of a visceral metaphor of the lemon pickle. She tells Seema that a good married woman is similar to a lemon that has to be plucked, washed, and de-seeded ensuring it has lost all its original lust. The woman like the pickle can only be a palatable addition to the family meal after being processed and then left in the scorching sun. It is the main role of the domestic cage to reduce the female self to a consumable object through this culinary means. The experience of Seema is, thus, a struggle to fight this pickling process of it- to keep her native energy and not be devoured.

In order to grasp the intricacy of the resistance presented by Seema, one would need to contextualize her resistance within the larger theoretical context triangulating the aspect of spatial politics, environmental ethics, and existential thought. In the recent scholarship, the political and spatial aspects of the work of Haider have started to be charted and this serves as the strong basis where this study is developed. Seema, as a character, is, essentially as set forth in the literature, in reclaiming the self to the carceral space of joint family in *A Woman on a Suitcase* by Haider. The critical spatial theory was used in that research to establish the Hyderi home as disciplinary institution. The home architecture is also reported in the novel to be oppressive; the windows remain closed to avoid noises and sun rays, and the environment can become very stifling, with artificial lamps turned on in the daytime as well. This is a place that is meant to isolate women to the external world and force them to rely on the male gaze to be acknowledged. The bodily motion, then, is a response that needs to be a counter-strategy to the patriarchal fixation requirement. The oppression Seema is experiencing is however not spatial only; it is also closely tied to the perception and domination of the female nature. This requires ecofeminist approach. In the article, *Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Oppression: The Violence of Extraction in Gauhars An Abundance of Wild Roses*, the argument is that the logic of extraction is active in patriarchal systems, in which both the natural world and the vitality of women are mined to sustain social power. In the novel by Gauhar, maldevelopment has exhausted the land, and women have to be the bearers of the lack of resources.

The same energy is being played in *A Woman on a Suitcase* by Haider. The home sphere serves as a location of extraction. In this case, the energy of the woman is being exploited to propel the engine of the family honor, making the woman exhausted. The novel has a strong contrast between women who are no longer resistant to this extraction and the ones who are. Muneera is the sister in law of Seema who lives in London and represents the depleted resource. Although she is living in a posh Tudor home, she is said

to be stunted and mangled just like the bonsai trees that she has in her kitchen. Her husband, Ameen, is abusive and taking out her vitality and the need to preserve the Hyderi family perception. This essay will show how the process of pruning women in the home world is rather similar to the process of violence of extraction that is practiced on the earth. More pointedly, there is the psychological burden of such imprisonment, which indicates a deep existential crisis. Based on Jean-Paul Sartre, that work investigated the phenomenon of Bad Faith the effort to escape the burden of freedom by accepting a predetermined, social identity. The characters in *A Woman on a Suitcase* have to bear the same burden. Muneera is the submission to "Bad Faith." She stays in a viciously abusive marriage as she is sure that she cannot risk anything and should save her children and reputation of her parents. The role of the martyr is assumed by her because of the fear to make the wrong choice in her life. In her turn, Seema does not resist the burden of choice. The act of existential authenticity is her decision to abandon Momin, even though she faces social stigma of divorce and with no idea of her future. She decides to spend the agony of freedom rather than the ease of the cage. This model substitutes the outer oppression with the inner human agency and looks at the way Seema changes in becoming an object (in-itself) into a conscious subject (for-itself).

Although earlier research has managed to draw the political, environmental, and existential geographies of the novel, there is still a gap in the literature that needs to be bridged: the place of aesthetics as the means of liberation. It is not just the physical act of leaving the house that Seema opposes but rather it is a profound inseparable part of her character as an artist. The battle is carried out on visual and artistic levels throughout the novel. The Hyderi family tries to shape Seema into a particular aesthetic form- just a like the lemon pickle which has to be cooked so that it can be fitted in the jar. Seema rebels against this processing by means of her painting and her unwillingness to be aesthetically beautiful to her husband.

The denial by Momin of Seema is usually aesthetic. He desires a wife who is an object of passive beauty, like the bonsai trees that his sister has. Seema on her part rejects passive observation. She demands to be the producer of images. The present paper aims to fill this gap in the literature by stating that art is not a hobby, as it is practiced by Seema, but a counter-spatial practice. Through picking the paintbrush, Seema becomes more of a subject of patriarchal scrutiny, instead of a viewing subject. She employs the "Canvas" of her fantasy to destroy the "Cage" of housewifery. Painting gives her a chance to redefine her own reality and make the oppressors objects of her observation, not the creators of her destiny.

In order to formulate this aesthetic opposition, this discussion is based on three thematic aspects of the text, including the botanical metaphor of the Bonsai and the Wild Rose, the somatic recuperation of the body, and the reversal of the patriarchal gaze. The

former is a theme of the use of floral imagery as is used in the novel to represent the situation of women. Muneera is the sister-in-law of Seema who is the image of the bonsai existence. She has bonsai trees in her elegant house in London, which Seema finds to be deprived of their natural growth, tamed and stunted so that they play a decorative role. Muneera is a beautiful and statuesque woman whose beauty is made through violent control. Her husband has beaten her out, the violence has erased them, the wound on her head is a symbol of this, and the pressure of family honor has done the same. Seema, in a sharp contrast, identifies herself with the wild rose. As she paints, she opposes the shyness, closedness, withdrawing character of buds favored by Momin. She instead paints wild roses having thorns that are dangerous and sharp. She mentions that these flowers rebel against inquisitive hands, and bleed the usurper a little. This aesthetic decision is a denial of being trimmed down. Seema creates an ecofeminist aesthetics of plenty and protection in painting the wild rose, denying the sterility of the bonsai.

The second theme is the female body as a resistant canvas. The female body is minimized as a reproduction vessel or a place of shame in the patriarchal worldview of the Hyderis. Momin is always critical of the physical appearance of Seema, he describes her thighs as curdled milk and makes her feel awkward and inadequate. This aesthetic scorn is meant to create "Bad Faith," which makes Seema look at herself through the disparaging gaze of her husband.

Nevertheless, the novel follows a radically different path of somatic sovereignty. Seema travels to the Vagina Museum, in London, which is a venue that does not emphasize the reproductive functionality of the female body, but its ability to bring pleasure. In this case, she is informed that the clitoris has nothing to do with reproduction and the sole purpose of it is to bring pleasure. It is this awareness that makes her buy a vibrator and have an orgasmic experience the first time that her marriage did not offer. This self-gratification is clearly defined as a form of agency: "She wanted not to move the vibrator out of her - she was the one who controlled this process. Seema makes an existential jump by making her body a location of pleasure instead of responsibility, and this means shifting the passive object into an active agent by reclaiming her body as a place of joy. Lastly, the paper examines the formation of the Artist Gaze. Through the course of the early story, it is Seema who is observed, looked at by her mother-in-law, her matchmakers, and her husband. Surviving will require her to turn this relationship around. painting will enable her to be the viewer.

This change reaches its climax when she visits the national gallery where she watches Van Gogh Sunflowers. She associates herself with the withering flowers that appear to be furious about their unavoidable death and she sees them as a mirror image of the deadened life of Muneera. But she has the seed heads, too, are fat and brown and full of possibility--and she knows herself. This beauty revelation gives her the sense of clarity

that she requires to quit her marriage. She understands that she had to be out of it, observing the world, painting it, knowing it. This gaze is fully achieved in the last scene of the novel at the airport. Seema does not fall apart when Momin challenges her in the presence of his new wife, Beenish, trying to make her jealous. Instead, she watches them through the cold analytical vision of a painter. She describes his new bride having vacant eyes that she likens to roasted goat. She no longer views Momin as an influential patriarch, but as a hot air geysser. She makes them powerless by putting them in the context of her artistic vision. Instead, she draws them mentally and makes them objects of her observation and moves on to her own destiny. This paper will help in synthesizing these theoretical strands: the spatial politics of the home, the ecofeminist critique of pruning and the existential burden of choice to offer a holistic and new reading of a woman on a suitcase. Whereas the former studies dealt with the political act of leaving, the current paper dwells on the aesthetic one of seeing and creating.

2. Literature Review

In modern criticism of South Asian Anglophone literature, the joint family as a form of cultural institution has become subject to question, yet has become a key contestation over politics and gender. Postcolonial home tends to be ideologically labeled as a sanctuary of tradition and is therefore protected against the perceived evils of modernity. But the recent interventions have torn apart this romanticization and shown the domestic sphere as an area of strict surveillance. According to McClintock (1995), the home was not a neutral place but it was the focal point of organization of gendered hierarchies. The article *A Woman on a Suitcase* by Shazaf Fatima Haider (2024) has become a key point of analysis in this discussion, as a so-called modern-day critique of structural oppression inherent in the South Asian joint family system. Husain (2024) points out that Haider breaks down the marriage, patriarchy, and intergenerational conditioning complexities to see that the victims of patriarchy usually turn into its perpetrators. The novel reveals the functioning of the home as a discursive institutional facility in which conformity is imposed by policing the female body. This is best exemplified by the philosophy of the matriarch Ma Jee, who compares a proper married woman to a lemon pickle which needs to be de-seeded and left under the sun that will make it lose its original effervescence. Mahmood (2025) also notes that Haider employs metaphors to show how women are socialized to hide the pain behind the social facades, e.g. using brocade curtains.

The most notable academic response to the novel by Haider so far is the connection between the space limitation and the agency of a woman. As the title of the paper by Bibi, Shaheen, and Qamar (2025) *The Subjective Turn: Reclaiming Autonomy from Postcolonial Patriarchy* in Haider tells us, the main conflict of the novel takes place due to a significant

spatial shift. That study provided that the main character, Seema, shifts out of the stagnant, oppressive confinement of the house to the rebellious, transitional realm on top of her suitcase. Based on the critical spatial theory of Lefebvre (1991), which suggests that space is an active production to enforce dominant ideologies, this previous research established that the female identity in the Hyderi home is constructed in a panoptic space, by restricting the corporeal and spatial of women. The suitcase was examined as a major material metaphor of the un-rooted self in opposition with patriarchal insistence on being rooted. Tahir (2024) also emphasizes the way in which Seema handles cultural dislocations following her eviction and how she manages to convert humiliation into a self-discovery process. Although such studies were successful in mapping the political geography of the departure of Seema, defining mobility as a locus of such resistance, they did not pay much attention to the particular aesthetic mechanisms of that resistance namely her painting and her visual gaze.

In order to have full comprehension of domestic violence portrayed in text by Haider, we need to put it in the wider context of ecofeminist theories that inter-relate domination of women with the domination of nature. The story by Haider creates a unique contrast between the wild and the man-made, specifically when it comes to the description of the character of Muneera who is surrounded by bonsai trees, which seem to be stunted, almost mangled. This description is quite close to the results of Bibi and Shaheen (2025) in the article titled *Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Oppression: The Violence of Extraction in Gauhar An Abundance of Wild Roses*. As part of that analysis, the authors have applied the concept of maldevelopment suggested by Vandana Shiva (2014) in order to develop a case that states that the environmental degradation is inextricably connected with the oppression of women. In the same way that the land in the story Gauhar is, a violence of extraction is applied to the land, so are the female characters in the novel Haider being a violence of containment. The household is like extractive economies: it excavates female energy in order to preserve the honour of the patriarchal framework. Similar contexts observed by Saleem et al. (2024) have seen female marginality being represented using environmental metaphors. Seeing Muneera as a bonsai, a living object brutally trimmed to fit a decorative shelf, one can observe how the family of Hyderi imposes a sense of unnatural stagnation, which is very much opposed to the artistic output of wild rose produced by Seema. The fact that such characters as Muneera cannot leave their abusive backgrounds is indicative of some kind of psychological paralysis that is not confined to social pressures. The only way this paralysis can be analyzed is in terms of existential philosophy. According to Bibi et al. (2025), as the author presented in the article, *The Burden of Choice: Existential Free-Will and Moral Responsibility in This House of Clay and Water*, the marginalized people experience suffering when they are compelled to address their radical freedom in the rigid prescriptive society.

Based on Sartre (2007), that paper investigated the idea of the bad faith the effort to escape the problem of freedom by assuming a predetermined nature. The same is observed in the work of Haider. Muneera is the symbol of the submission of Bad Faith, she stays in an abusive marriage since she thinks that she cannot risk anything, and she takes the position of the martyr in order not to cope with the fear of the awful duty to be free. As Cris (2024) observes, the description of emotional manipulation by Haider shows the mechanism of patriarchal control based on normal emotional coercion. On the other hand, the path of Seema is the coming to terms with the burden of choice. Her abandonment of Momin even in the absence of a future guaranteed is in line with the existential imperative of self-definition by the action, instead of the essence. Although the spatial (Bibi et al., 2025; Tahir, 2024), environmental (Bibi and Shaheen, 2025), and existential (Bibi et al., 2025; Cris, 2024) aspects of South Asian women writing have been covered in the existing literature, the role of aesthetics as a liberating force of the South Asian woman in the *A Woman on a Suitcase* has not been yet fulfilled. Seema is a woman not only who leaves but also a woman who paints. Her creative work, in particular, her interpretation of wild roses with thorns and her interpretation of Sunflowers by Van Gogh, offers an anti-narration of the pruning of the joint family. The paper aims at addressing this gap by the argument that art is the canvas through which the cage is deconstructed, and provides a synthesis of spatial, ecofeminist, and existential resistance.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive way of analysis in literature. The best approach to this research is qualitative research since the main goal of the study does not involve the measurement of statistical data, but the exploration of various complex human experiences, social patterns, and symbolism in a literary work. Particularly, the novel *A Woman on a Suitcase* by Shazaf Fatima Haider (2024) is examined in this paper, not only as a fiction, but as a sort of social record, which captures the facts of the postcolonial domestic life in South Asia. The main approach that is used in this case is the textual analysis and paying special attention to close reading. Close reading is a process that is used in literary studies and involves a close, thorough analysis of language, imagery and form of the text. Rather than merely considering the overall storyline, this approach considers the individual words, metaphors and symbols in order to reveal some underlying meanings. An example is not merely observing that the protagonist paints flowers but a close reading to this observation will examine the reasons why she uses wild rose that is full of thorns rather than the smooth and domestic flowers. It poses the question of how the particular explanation of what is meant by a bonsai tree and what is meant by a blue suitcase, works to support the overall thesis of the novel, which is freedom and control.

The paper does not rely on the thematic readings, which may merely include such themes as marriage or divorce, but deconstructs the aesthetic themes of the novel. Aesthetics is defined as the appearance, feel, and sense of things. Thus, this study considers the way that the characters perceive the world, how they organize their houses, and what they experience with their bodies. The main goal is to dismantle the manner in which these aesthetic practices operate as mechanisms of subversion to the patriarchal spatial confinement. Examining the relationship between the Cage (the domestic world) and the Canvas (the space of artistic production), this study shows how art is being used as a weapon to survive.

4. Theoretical Framework

The current paper is based on a qualitative, interpretive research approach which is used to conduct a rigorous study of the novel of Shazaf Fatima Haider titled *A Woman on a Suitcase* (2024). The complexity of the human experiences, complex social patterns and profoundly embedded symbolism which are impossible to measure statistically or quantitatively dictate the usage of qualitative approach. This study is able to get the details of postcolonial South Asian domestic life by not handling the novel as a work of fiction, but as a social record. Textual analysis as a form of close reading is the principal analytical instrument which presupposes in-depth exploration of the language, the use of imagery, and the formal framework of the text. This method questions particular symbols and metaphors rather than just the plot, and attempts to find out what lies behind them.

Notably, the paper transcends beyond the traditional thematic readings, which may end at the surface-level problems of marriage or divorce, but deconstructs the aesthetic themes of the novel. Aesthetics would mean the look, feel and sensory experience of things in this case. In its turn, the study explores how characters view their surrounding world, how they structure their domestic space and the way they feel about their physical bodies. It is aimed at breaking down the ways these aesthetic practices are used as mechanisms of subversion in response to patriarchal spatial restriction. The study by analyzing the connection between the domestic world (the Cage) and the space of artistic production as the Canvas illustrates the use of art as an indispensable survival and self-reclaiming weapon. In order to have a detailed analysis, this study employs a triangulated theoretical framework. Triangulation means using various theoretical perspectives in order to justify the findings and offer a multi-dimensional approach. The paper uses three different though intersecting pillars, which are the Spatial Theory, Ecofeminism, and Existentialism. This framework is developed on the basis of the previous scholarly discourse about South Asian literary resistance, namely, toward political autonomy, environmental cruelty, and moral responsibility.

The first pillar is the Critical Spatial Theory. This lens is applied to the physical locations of the novel house, walls, gates and the suitcase. The theories of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre have been integrated into the paper based on the earlier work by such theorists as The Subjective Turn (Bibi et al., 2025), which describes the home as a site of political control. In Foucault Discipline and Punish, a concept of Panopticon is modified in the study. The Panopticon model which initially was a prison model in which there is a state of constant visibility of the inmates is used in this case with the Hyderi joint family home. The methodology explores the way the architectural deprivation of privacy and the mother-in-law (Ma Jee) and husband (Momin), through surveillance, act as a domestic prison. The female protagonist starts to police herself, which is an indication of internalization of patriarchal control. To supplement this, the theory that space is a social product by Lefebvre enables the study to perceive the home as a system of rules that is supposed to keep women at the subservient end. The paper views the ultimate eviction of Seema to her suitcase as a spatial resistance. She sits on her suitcase outside the gate and disrupts the carceral logic of the house creating a new mobile space of her own.

The second pillar of the framework is Ecofeminism which examines the connection between the oppression of women and exploitation of nature. This is the lens that is needed to unravel the floral imagery of the novel, especially the opposition between the bonsai and the wild rose. Based on Vandana Shiva, the paper applies the concept of maldevelopment and violence of extraction. Shiva says that the patriarchal capitalism views both the nature and women as resources that can be mined. The concept is used in this paper to discuss the pruning or depriving women characters of the energy to preserve the honour of the family. The research also applies the logic of domination by Karen Warren that explains the superiority of the culture over nature and men over women. The ethics of care as presented by Warren offers an alternative though, which enables the paper to entail a comparison between the bonsai tree (cut and tamed) and the wild rose (self-grown). With this theory, the art of Seema is seen not only as a pastime, but as a reclaiming of what is ecologically sound, or what can be called ecological integrity, the unwillingness to be carved up or put down by the logic of patriarchy. The third pillar is Existentialism that changes how the exterior structures of oppression are prioritized and focuses on the inner psychological choice to depart. Whereas spatial theory refers to the where and ecofeminism refers to the feel of oppression, the existentialism refers to the choice of liberation. Based on the main concepts of Jean-Paul Sartre, namely, Radical Freedom and Bad Faith, the study approaches the choice of the characters as a philosophical viewpoint. Sartre believes that people are condemned to be free i.e. we are always in control of our decisions. The methodology examines the paralysis of Muneera as an experience of the Bad Faith- lying to oneself that there is no choice that one can make to escape the responsibility of having the burden. On the contrary, the actions of Seema are discussed in

terms of authenticity. She accepts the poverty of being responsible when she reclaims her body and seeks a divorce. This paradigm enables the research to discuss such an argument that Seema is not just a victim who has to leave the situation, but is a philosopher with conscious life decisions.

The text of the novel itself is the source of data on this qualitative research. The method of collection will include a detailed and recurring reading on *A Woman on a Suitcase* with an intention to derive a certain textual evidence. This includes isolating passages, dialogue and visual description that are congruent to the three theoretical pillars. The analysis shows that the aesthetic act of painting is what leads to the transformation of Seema by associating certain words and scenes to the overarching philosophical theories. It follows her path that she started as an object to be gazed to a gazer at the world. This strict methodological stance means that the results are not just opinions of a subjective nature but that is based on academic theory and tangible textual evidence.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The narrative of *A Woman on a Suitcase* commences with a rupture in the spatial order. Seema Hyderi is introduced not within the domestic interior, but on its threshold, "perched on top of an empty blue Samsonite, staring at the gate which her husband had pushed her out of twenty minutes ago" (Haider, 2024, p. 1). This opening tableau is emblematic of the novel's central spatial conflict: the incompatibility of the female subject with the "carceral space" of the joint family home. As argued in "*The Subjective Turn*" (Bibi et al., 2025a), the Hyderi household functions as a panopticon, a disciplinary institution where architecture and ideology converge to surveil and correct female behavior. The Hyderi household panoptic surveillance is supported by a rigid logic of the factory. The patriarch, Arshad Hyderi, explained the crises of the family by the paradigm of industrial management, and he asks Momin, what will we do in case of a factory crisis. This commodification of home life transforms Seema not just as a human being but as a kind of property of a worthy heir- an adjunct of machinery which has to be solved or surveyed. The corporeal basis of the Cage is determined by the resultant systemic dehumanization. In this configurational matrix the first unsuitable behaviour of Seema is not viewed as a character defect but rather it is a mechanical fault within the family system. However, a closer aesthetic analysis reveals that this surveillance is not merely about physical control, but about imposing a specific visual order—a tableau of domestic perfection in which the woman must serve as a static, decorative object. The Hyderi home is curated to negate privacy. Ma Jee, the matriarch, enforces a regime of total transparency, admonishing Seema that there should be "No space between you and me, my love" (Haider, 2024, p. 71). This erasure of boundaries is framed as affection, yet it functions as a mechanism of control, ensuring that the daughter-in-law cannot cultivate an interior life

separate from the family unit. The most virulent metaphor of the horticultural systemic containment is reflected in the paradigm of pickle-making as Ma Jee explains it. Ma Jee compares a proper married woman to a lemon that has to be plucked, de-seeded and put in the sun until the original vitality is depleted. The domestic space that is sour brine is designed to turn the woman into the welcoming accompaniment to a meal-- she is always subordinate to the main item and always easy to swallow. It is this pickling which Seema is categorically denying, which helps her to pass through the Cage to the Canvas. The house itself is described as a space where windows are kept shut to keep out "noise and sun" (p. 8), creating a stifling atmosphere where "lamps were switched on during the day" (p. 8). This artificial lighting mirrors the artificiality of the roles the women are forced to play. Seema notes that inside, she is "always on display, always performing, always failing" (p. 8). The domestic interior is thus an aesthetic stage where the female body is constantly scrutinized for flaws.

The mechanism of "eviction"—Momin repeatedly throwing Seema and her suitcase out of the gate—serves as the ultimate disciplinary tool. It is a spatial declaration that Seema has no territorial rights; her existence within the home is conditional upon her performance of submission. However, Seema subverts this punishment through her interaction with the suitcase. By sitting *on* the Samsonite, she transforms an object of transient exile into a locus of stability. As noted in "*The Subjective Turn*," the suitcase becomes a "mobile island of sovereignty" (Bibi et al., 2025). Aesthetically, this creates a jarring visual contrast: the static, closed gate of the Hyderi fortress versus the fluid, mobile potential of the woman on the suitcase. While the house represents the "Cage," the suitcase represents the possibility of the "Canvas"—a space that moves, changes, and can be inscribed with new meaning.

The "panoptic" nature of the family extends beyond the physical walls to the digital realm, further tightening the spatial cage. When Seema visits Muneera in London, she discovers that Ameen surveils his wife through a "ring doorbell" (Haider, 2024, p. 146). The domestic sphere is literally wired for observation; Muneera cannot receive a visitor without her husband's immediate knowledge. This technological surveillance collapses the distance between the public and private, ensuring that the patriarchal gaze is omnipresent. Muneera's terror when Ameen discovers Seema's presence—"He saw you through the ring doorbell... Just leave, damn you" (p. 146)—illustrates the totalizing nature of this control. The home is not a sanctuary; it is a prison where the inmate is watched by an invisible guard. The aesthetic violence of the Hyderi and Khan households is most vividly articulated through floral imagery, inviting an ecofeminist reading. As established in "*Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Oppression*" (Bibi & Shaheen, 2025), the logic of patriarchy is often synonymous with the logic of extraction and environmental domination.

In *A Woman on a Suitcase*, the female self is treated as wild nature that must be "pruned," "tamed," or "extracted" to fit the domestic economy.

The character of Muneera serves as the primary aesthetic metaphor for this "pruning." Living in a renovated Tudor home filled with "lot of crystal" (p. 137), Muneera's environment is one of suffocating curation. Crucially, her kitchen displays "bonsai trees" on wooden shelves (p. 145). Seema observes that these trees have been "pruned into pretty shapes" but appear "stunted, almost mangled" (p. 145). The bonsai is the ultimate symbol of patriarchal aesthetics: it is a "living entity that has been violently restricted from reaching its full growth" (Bibi & Shaheen, 2025). Muneera is the human equivalent of these trees. She is beautiful, "statuesque," and unwrinkled, but this preservation is the result of a "stunted" existence (Haider, 2024, p. 138, 145). She lives in a state of "constant fear" (p. 163), her vitality extracted to maintain the façade of a perfect marriage. Just as the land in Gauhar's narrative is depleted by "maldevelopment" (Bibi & Shaheen, 2025), Muneera is depleted by the emotional labor of managing Ameen's rage. She is "domesticated and displayed" (p. 145), a beautiful object stripped of her wildness.

In contrast, Seema's mother, Sommaya (Mummy), represents the violence of the "gardener." Mummy's relationship with nature is defined by control. Seema finds her mother in the garden, "snip-snip-snipping" with gardening shears (p. 22). Mummy systematically removes "Every offending stem that poked out sideways," "swiftly circumcised" the growth (p. 22). This horticultural violence mirrors her parenting style; she seeks to prune Seema's "disheveled appearance" and her unsuitable behavior to fit the mold of a respectable divorcee (p. 21). Mummy's garden is a space of "ritualistic" silence, where the chaotic abundance of life is curbed to maintain order (p. 157). Seema resists this "bonsai" existence through her own artistic production. When she picks up her paintbrush, she rejects the "shy, closed, retreating" flowers that Momin prefers (p. 44). Instead, she paints "wild roses" (p. 44). She describes her creation: "They were dramatic, beautiful and not easily uprooted. Not without making the usurper bleed a little" (p. 44). Here, the aesthetic becomes a weapon of resistance. The thorns on the wild rose represent Seema's refusal to be "handled" without consequence. By identifying with the wild rose, Seema aligns herself with an ecofeminist ethic of "abundance"—a refusal to be scarce, small, or contained. As noted in the analysis of Gauhar's work, the wild rose flourishes "despite harsh conditions" (Bibi & Shaheen, 2025); similarly, Seema's art flourishes in the "mess" of her divorce, rejecting the "manicured" sterility of Muneera's life.

The battle between the cage and the canvas is fought most intimately on the terrain of the female body. In the Hyderi worldview, the body is an object to be critiqued and utilized for reproduction. Momin's gaze is relentlessly critical; he views Seema's "expanding waist-line" with dismay (Haider, 2024, p. 1) and finds her curly hair "hideous" (p. 53). He reduces her to a collection of flawed parts, comparing her thighs to "curdled

milk" (p. 53). This aesthetic rejection forces Seema into a state of somatic shame, creating an existential crisis. As argued in *"The Burden of Choice"* (Bibi et al., 2025), characters like Nida in Mansab's work suffer from "identity fragmentation" due to objectification. Seema initially experiences this fragmentation, feeling "awkward and inadequate, ugly" when compared to Muneera's "luminescent skin" (Haider, 2024, p. 138). However, the novel traces a trajectory of somatic reclamation that moves from shame to pleasure. The turning point occurs in London, specifically through Seema's visit to the "Vagina Museum" (p. 120). This space, dedicated to the "celebration of menstruation" (p. 121) and the anatomy of pleasure, offers Seema a new vocabulary for her body. She learns that the clitoris has "no reproductive value—its only function was to provide pleasure" (p. 121). This realization is existentially radical. It severs the link between the female body and the patriarchal duty of childbearing.

Seema's purchase of the "Rabbit" vibrator and her subsequent act of self-pleasure constitute a profound "Existential Revolt" (Bibi et al., 2025). In the bathtub, as she uses the device, she experiences a "wave of pleasure" and realizes, "She willed her hand not to slide the vibrator out of her - she was in control of this" (Haider, 2024, p. 136). This assertion of control is pivotal. It marks the transition from being an object of Momin's disdain to being the subject of her own joy. As the narrative states, "Momin, Ma Jee, Mummy... none of these people mattered in the wake of the delicious languor" (p. 136). By reclaiming her body as a site of pleasure rather than duty, Seema breaks the "Bad Faith" that kept her tethered to the marriage. She accepts the "burden of choice" the choice to please herself and in doing so, renders the patriarchal cage irrelevant. In contrast, Muneera remains trapped in "Bad Faith." Despite being physically battered by Ameen Seema witnesses him delivering a "hard slap" and dragging her "by the hair" (p. 147, 171). Muneera refuses to leave. She rationalizes her submission as a sacrifice for her children and family honor, claiming, "I have withstood a lot to protect my family" (p. 144). Existentially, Muneera has surrendered her radical freedom to the essence of the suffering wife. She believes she "cannot risk anything" (p. 163), viewing her situation as a fate rather than a choice. This juxtaposition highlights the diverging paths of the two women: Muneera chooses the safety of the known hell (the Cage), while Seema chooses the terrifying uncertainty of the unknown (the Canvas).

The ultimate liberation in *A Woman on a Suitcase* is achieved through the cultivation of the *artist's gaze*. Throughout the early chapters, Seema is the object of the gaze—inspected by matchmakers like Mrs. Khan who checks her weight, and watched by Ma Jee who monitors her movements. To survive, Seema must reverse this dynamic; she must become the observer. Painting serves as the mechanism for this reversal. In London, Seema's uncle Fauzi provides her with a "makeshift studio" with an "unopened box of oil

paints" (p. 109, 107), encouraging her to document her world. The artistic career of Seema in London is a calculated retrieval of the wildness her mother strived to circumcise her.

His gift of an unopened pack of oil paints to her by Uncle Fauzi does more than provide her with material, it gives her the right to space that Karachi had taken away.

Her subsequent awakening in the National Gallery serves as the breaking point in the bonsai-like life that Muneera leads.

As Muneera continues to live as a living being, violently constrained, Seema associates herself with the ugly fuzziness of the seed heads in the sunflower, things that are fat and brown but full of potential.

The women are also able to repudiate the patriarchal visual order which requires women to act as decorative and motionless artefacts by embracing her own corporeal plainness and darkness as a site of potential. When she visits the "National Gallery", she experiences an aesthetic epiphany before "Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*" (p. 155). She does not identify with the idealized beauty of high art, but with the "wilting flowers" that seem to "rage against [their] inevitable demise" (p. 156). She sees Muneera in the "drooping" petals but recognizes herself in the "seed heads"—"fat and brown but full of possibility" (p. 156). This moment of visual analysis allows her to decode her reality. She realizes that the "domestic cage" creates the "wilted" woman, while the "outside" world offers the possibility of growth. She concludes that she "needed to be outside, watching the world, painting it, studying it" (p. 156). The act of seeing becomes an act of being.

This aesthetic empowerment culminates in the novel's resolution at the airport. Three years after her divorce, Seema is no longer the weeping woman on the suitcase; she is a "global traveler" and an artist. When she encounters Momin and his new wife, Beenish, the power dynamic of the gaze is completely inverted. Momin attempts to reassert his dominance by flaunting his new wife and the diamond ring Seema returned. However, Seema does not react with the jealousy he expects. Instead, she observes them with the detached, analytical eye of a painter. She sketches the scene in her mind, noting the "vacant eyes" of Beenish, comparing them to a "roasted goat" (p. 204). She sees Momin not as a "tiger" (as Ma Jee's stories suggested), but as a "geyser" a source of "predictable outbursts of hot air and steam" (p. 205). By framing them within her artist's gaze, she reduces them to subjects of her observation. They become figures in *her* landscape, rather than the rulers of her world. The final gesture of the novel—Seema executing a "two fingered salute" to Momin (p. 205) is a mimicry of the salute he gave her when he divorced her. It is an act of aesthetic reclamation, stripping the gesture of his power and appropriating it for her own exit. As she walks onto the "bridge, into the airplane," (p. 205), she disappears from their view. The woman who was once "perched" on the suitcase in static exile is now in motion, her canvas expanding to include the entire world.

The analysis demonstrates that the suitcase in Haider's novel is not merely a receptacle for belongings, but a threshold between two opposing aesthetics: the manicured, extractive containment of the domestic "Cage" and the wild, creative abundance of the "Canvas." Seema's journey is a rejection of the "bonsai" existence accepted by Muneera—a life stunted by the violence of patriarchal extraction. Instead, through the reclamation of somatic pleasure and the cultivation of an artistic gaze, Seema embodies the "existential revolt" of the free subject. By painting her own "wild roses" and refusing to be "pruned" by her mother or "pickled" by her mother-in-law, Seema asserts that the female self is not a raw material for family honor, but a work of art in perpetual creation. The novel ultimately posits that for the postcolonial woman, the only way to survive the domestic panopticon is to pick up the suitcase and paint a new door in the wall.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that *A Woman on a Suitcase* by Shazaf Fatima Haider is a radical re-imagining of the female resistance in the South Asian setting. Although the spatial politics of the novel, which the previous scholarship and in particular The Subjective Turn (Bibi et al., 2025) rightly discovered, is the passage of the domestic interior into the liminal exterior, the presented study identifies that the driving force of this liberation is, in fact, aesthetic. The legal (divorce) and spatial (migration) success of Seema Hyderi is not just a matter of perception. Through the development of the gaze of the artist, she destroys the so-called domestic panopticon which attempted to stabilize her on the spot. Within the novel, it is assumed that the postcolonial woman is constructed as being under surveillance and pruning into the cage of patriarchy and being under observation and construction of the canvas of liberation as being built in the wild abundance. The harshness of the comparison between Muneera and Seema itself is a strong ecofeminist challenge to the violence of extraction. In the article, *Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Oppression* (Bibi and Shaheen, 2025), the authors argue that the capitalistic economy of patriarchy depends on the exhaustion of female vitality as a way of sustaining social order. The cost of this extraction is demonstrated through the tragic fate of Muneera who accepts her bonsai existence that is stunted, almost mangled and domesticated in a shelf (Haider, 2024, p. 145). She is still a beautiful object, and one without the original vigor. On the other hand, the artistic creation of Seema, who makes wild roses painted in red with thorns that are poisonous and dangerous (Haider, 2024, p. 44) takes back the ecological self of the female. The paper concludes that Seema in her art is a denial of being a raw material to the honor of the Hyderi family; she is the gardener of her own wild and as such the paper asserts an aesthetic of growing rather than being contained.

Existential implications also, the study substantiates the fact that aesthetic resistance is closely connected with existential authenticity. The refusal of Muneera to quit

her abusive marriage is an act of submission to Bad Faith, that is refusing oneself the freedom of choice (Bibi et al., 2025). She conceals herself with that of the martyr to escape the frightening reality of the future. Seema, though, is happy to take the burden of choice. Her experience of leaving the "Vagina Museum" where she reclaims her body as a pleasure-center (Haider, 2024, p. 123) to the airport terminal is a steady subjectivity practice of being existential. By refusing the essence of the problem which the protagonist has been forced to accept (the obedient wife/pickle) and deciding to identify herself through her behavior (painting/traveling), the protagonist shifts the state of an object (in-itself) into the state of a conscious subject (for-itself). The portable studio finally, the blue samsonite suitcase no longer serves the purpose of a travel item. At the beginning it is a place of exile; at the end a stage of observation. When Seema draws a portrait of Momin and his new wife in the airport, downgrading them to objects of her painting noting the vacant looks and the roasted goat appearance (Haider, 2024, p. 204) she demonstrates that she has not only gotten out of the cage, but she has also broken the mental walls. She does not want to be looked upon by them anymore; she looks at them. The Cage has been overcome by the Canvas. The story of Haider therefore ends by stating that the real freedom is the ability to reframe the world and the suitcase is not a reminder of uprootedness but rather a mobile studio where the female self can be constantly redefined, painted in those colors which are too wild to be held in the domestic interior.

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