



AN EXISTENTIALIST ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED SHORT STORIES IN *AUSTENISTAN*: A KIERKEGAARDIAN READING

Zarbakht
zarbakht100@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3904-0820>

Former MS Scholar, Department of English, City University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Muhammad Salman
salman9999587@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9861-6917>

Former MS Scholar, Department of English, City University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Abdullah Zubair
abdullahzubair3005@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4356-6065>

Former MS Scholar, Department of English, City University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Abstract

Every society has its own authority of truth and identity. The power structures, in the form of culture, religion, morality and financial status, define an individual's identity and status in society. The present study aims to explore the dominant power structures, particularly in Pakistani society, that give meaning to and define individuals' lives. It also argues that these institutions of life hinder individuals from exercising their free will. An individual goes through the three modes of existence in life. These are the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages defined by Kierkegaard (1845), in which an individual enjoys the liberty of exercising free will and ultimately takes a leap of faith. Qualitative in nature, the present study analyzes five short stories from *Austenistan*, a Pakistani fictional anthology by Laleen Sukhera. As the study is based on social constructivist philosophy, Pakistani society is observed and analyzed in light of *Austenistan*. Toulmin's model of argumentation is used to analyze the text. The model operates in three primary steps: claim, grounds, and warrants. It explores various factors, such as social, ethical, financial, and cultural forces, that hinder individuals from exercising their free will. Due to these obstacles, individuals are left with no option but to give up on their desires. In the future, a study could be conducted on the Marxist perspective, feminism, or cultural studies within the framework of existentialism.

Keywords: *Austenistan*, *Free Will*, *Kierkegaardian Existentialism*, *Pakistani Society*.

Corresponding Author: Zarbakht (Former MS Scholar, Department of English, City University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan)
Email: zarbakht100@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3904-0820>

1. Introduction

Desire for domination can be found at every level and institute of life, including the state level, at the family level in the form of patriarchy, the institute of religion, educational institutes, and financial status. These issues of domination and suppression have been represented in literature by numerous writers, in fiction and non-fiction, narrating history in a sarcastic and ironic tone, bringing these paramount issues to the forefront. To gain superiority and establish one's own directives, the basic question is to inquire into the meaning of life. This question has been addressed by philosophers such as Nietzsche (1882), Sartre (1945), and Camus (1942), and it will continue to hold strategic importance for every generation.

In pre-modern times, the primary purpose of life was to serve religion, as people lived closer to nature due to the absence of science and associated their existence with a higher power. Moser and McCreary (2010) argue that "to come to oneself in self-knowledge and before God" (p. 127). Individuals reflected on themselves and meditated on their relationship with God. With the advent of science and technology, religion was gradually pushed to the background. The society became secular and lost its central point, i.e., its relation with God. Translating the German version of Nietzsche's 1882 work, Kaufmann (1974) writes:

"Whither is God?" he cried. I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers.... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? (p. 181)

The idea behind science, technology and industrialization was to provide individuals with every kind of assistance in life. In the field of life, science played a significant role. But it also created chaos among the regions competing to become superpowers and dictate the world. During that period, the phrase 'God is dead' (1882), Nietzsche gave the idea that God was no longer the center to direct the lives of the people (Kaufmann, 1974). Religion was ignored. The meaning of life no longer stood to be a divine purpose; rather, it was equated with nothingness.

Following the idea of nothingness, Sartre (1945) coined the phrase 'existence precedes essence'. According to Sartre, the meaning of life is inherently the essence of our being. The life of an individual is defined by the actions one undertakes. "Existence precedes essence... man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards" (Sawwa & Neimneh, 2016, p. 108). The basic idea of existentialism is that one is responsible for one's own actions and gives meaning to one's own life through the exercise of free will.

The absurdist response to this question is articulated by Camus (1942): Sisyphus rolled a huge rock to the top of the cliff, but each time it fell back to the foot of the cliff. Our desire for meaning, value, and order in life is countered by the silence and enigma of the universe and phenomena (Sawwa & Neimneh, 2016). This work suggested that even if one struggled hard to find the meaning of life, it proved to be of no use.

Nonetheless, Kierkegaard defines the life of an individual as one that goes through certain phases in which they give meaning to their lives, exercise free will, and are held accountable for their actions. The ‘single individual’, as Kierkegaard (1851) termed it, was independent and free in terms of exercising one’s own freedom and the directions one wanted to give to one’s life (Rempel, 1959). However, the freedom of choice is limited to one’s thoughts only. This is because certain dominant power structures hinder individuals’ paths. Subjective meanings project from the experiences of individuals living in a society. These meanings are provided by power structures in the form of social, moral, cultural and financial ones. Therefore, they surrender before these powers and are ultimately left unable to exercise free will.

The present study focuses on Kierkegaard’s (1845) existential theory. It takes into account the modes of existence given by Kierkegaard. The idea that a ‘single individual’ who is independent in his life regarding his choices is responsible for all the actions and their consequences. The individual takes a leap of faith at a certain point in his life. The study argues that certain power structures can hinder one’s life, leaving one unable to exercise one’s free will.

To validate the point raised in the study, the Pakistani fictional work *Austenistan* (2018) by Sukhera is selected. As the study is based on social constructivist philosophy, the characters from these five selected short stories are closely observed. They are put in the framework of Kierkegaard’s modes of existence. Evidence from the lives of these individuals shows that they surrender before dominant powers in society, such as social, ethical and financial constraints, rendering them unable to enjoy the liberty of free will.

Power structures construct meaning for individuals and groups. Dominant power structures hinder the individual’s power to exercise free will. Social constructivist research examines how individuals interact within society, guided by societal and cultural norms. Subjective meanings are deduced from various situations in a society. For this purpose, this research analyzes five short stories from Pakistani fiction and *Austenistan* and discusses the characters and their lifestyles in each story. It presents an argument within the constraints of Kierkegaard’s concept of free will.

1.1. Research Objectives

The following are the main goals of the current research study:

1. To explore the power structures in the selected short stories, constructing meaning for individuals in society

2. To argue that the dominant power structures hinder individuals portrayed in *Austenistan* from exercising free will

1.2. Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What power structures in society construct meaning for individuals who are portrayed in the selected short stories?
2. How do the dominant power structures hinder individuals from exercising free will as portrayed in *Austenistan*?

Moreover, the study attempts to explain that, although apparently independent, people experience antagonism and are divided into social hierarchies. These may be reasons for the uneven distribution of rights and privileges among individuals in a society. This study adopts an argumentative approach to the characters in selected short stories in *Austenistan*, using Kierkegaard's (1845) existentialist theory as a framework. Moreover, this study may attract the attention of future researchers to situate Pakistani fiction within the existentialist framework.

2. Literature Review

To derive an objective meaning to life has led philosophers and thinkers in different directions. Every philosopher presents their own stance about life. Kierkegaard's (1845) philosophy, however, originated in his personal life. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gardiner, 2002) outlined, "It was the atmosphere of gloom and religious guilt that emanated from a parent who believed that both he and his family lay under a mysterious curse" (Gardiner, 2002, p. 21). It was Kierkegaard's father who once cursed God while out in a stormy field. Kierkegaard's personal life proved pivotal in making him the fountainhead of existentialism.

The Industrial Revolution brought with it alienation and estrangement. Rempal (1959) defined an individual as "the single, finite, responsible, simple, suffering and guilty creature, who has to make a decision in face of God and who consequently is more interested in ethical questions and in salvation than in abstract speculations" (p. 1). The existential notion that every individual was responsible for their own actions was because they determined their own fate by exercising free will. The three modes of existence given by Kierkegaard (1845) that were the aesthetic mode, ethical mode and the religious mode wrap up with the concept of leap of faith. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gupta, 1969) asserted that individuals seek pleasure and pursue different paths leading to happiness. They can differentiate between vice and virtue, good and evil, and can direct their lives to a certain angle. However, the unavoidable dominant forces become obstacles in their path, leading them to give up their desires and forgo liberty.

Furthermore, Hills (2022) illustrated that there came a point in individuals' lives when they faced an existential crisis. They questioned the realities of their lives, like why

they lived in that particular mode and what the point of their existence was. With the choice that every individual makes in their lifetime, excluding every other possibility of a different lifestyle. “The reality is that to pursue this certain life we let some of our potentials wither on the vine” (p. 3). In order to cope with boredom and anxiety, individuals adopt certain modes like seeking alienation from existential crisis through procrastination of their tasks, self-harm through drugs, exercises, etc.

Bevir (1999), in his research article, discussed the ‘power/knowledge’ concept of the French intellectual Foucault. The power relations set agendas and the domain of ‘truth’ for individuals. Foucault denied the objective truth and the subjectivity of individuals. Bevir (1999) argued that Foucault opposed the idea of an autonomous individual who could direct his life using his reason. The subject was not a rational agent thinking and acting under his own self-imposed and self-created commands; “rather the subject is a product of the social structures, episteme, discourses or something else of the sort” (p. 347). These social structures and discourses give meaning and create the truth for individuals. This study illustrates that social structure gives directions to an individual. It is never at an individual’s discretion.

Threadcraft (2019) referred to the American author and social activist, Gloria Jean Watkins, known by her pen name ‘bell hooks’. She highlights the conflict between black and white feminists and the intersectionality of patriarchal power structures. Hooks (1984) argued that black women should be included in feminist theory and also mobilized them to do so. The bourgeois white women had access to electronic and print media, as well as other communication resources. They used the black women in their movements by highlighting the collective oppression faced by them. In this way, their knowledge and power of discourse served to highlight women of African origin as a commodity and placed Western feminists as the arbiters of the black feminine experience. The present study seeks to examine the idea that certain dominant power structures may hinder individuals’ exercise of free will.

Shah and Riaz (2022) have foregrounded the issue of women’s power struggles against various social barriers in their study. The researchers have claimed that literature plays an important role in enlightening society, and that writing was an important tool of resistance against various social obstacles. The study took into account the works of Evaristo, Keyes, and Khan from England, Ireland and Pakistan, respectively. Through textual analysis of their works, one can realize that women’s writings can serve as a tool for resisting a male-dominated society.

The selected works were *Trespassing* (2005), *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), and *This Charming Man* (2008), which proved to be a ‘paradigm of resistance’ that supported the idea that writing provided emancipation to women. Women’s resistance and struggle, as reflected in literature, provide women with individuality and identity, as was evident in

the 1920s and 30s, when women challenged norms and culture (Shah & Riaz, p. 3). *Trespassing* (2005) foregrounded women's decision-making power in society. The researchers have outlined Foucault in saying that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1990). Resistance, as shown in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Evaristo, was based on different levels of the spectrum, i.e., black females who associate with different sexualities, classes, and cultural backgrounds in Britain. The novel highlighted that its female characters were not allowed to be in a relationship with men. The book has claimed the emancipation of women, i.e., "women were much happier without men" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 92). *This Charming Man* by Keyes (2008) also spoke from a feminist perspective. The novel revolved around one man and four different women and depicted domestic abuse and gender imbalance. Shah and Riaz (2022) explain that "literary contributions by women writers during dictatorial regimes, anarchies, and genocides provide an inspirational impetus to the modern woman to write and challenge traditions and customs imposed on them" (p. 15). The genre of resistant literature is one way to confront the powerful in their domain.

Zambylas (2018), in his paper, has applied affect theory as articulated by Berlant to Spivak's essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*. The rhetorical question raised by Spivak in this essay portrays the East as dazzled by the West. The Eastern women are defined as undiversified because they could not speak for themselves, and womanhood is institutionalized. Landry and McLean (1996), in an interview with Spivak, argued that "she means that the subaltern as such cannot be heard by the privileged of either the First or Third Worlds. If the subaltern were able to make herself heard, she would cease to be subaltern" (p. 5). Affect theory is based on emotions and feelings, which are innate human behaviors. They also mentioned that "power relations work through affect and shape individual and social bodies; thus, researching, analyzing and reporting on subalternity requires attention to the ways in which affects (re) produce dominant social and political hierarchies and structures, forms of oppression and exclusions" (p. 7). Berlin is of the view that researchers often ignore the subalterns' sentimentality in their discourses. The present study takes into account the idea that, as the voices of the Others are unheard and their sentiments neglected, humanity is rendered unable to exercise free will due to certain power structures around them.

Obinyan (2014) explored human existence through Kierkegaard's ethical lens. To lead a purposeful and meaningful life, individuals should prioritize their subjective experience, engage in self-reflection, and distance themselves from the crowd. The researcher argued that our unthinking attitude largely causes anxiety, despair, and even crimes. He also notes that "the stages of existence relate to each other like the rungs of a ladder leading to a more perfect existence: and it is impossible to move from one to another

without a leap” (Obinyan, 2014, p. 4). The aesthetic stage is a continual hunt for satisfying moments. However, these moments eventually lead to boredom, leaving an individual feeling empty inside. On the other hand, “according to Kierkegaard, the ethical person does not have any relationship with God other than that of good moral conduct” (p. 5). Moral failure and sin are considered human weaknesses that can be overcome by intellectual knowledge of what is morally good. An encounter with God, in the religious stage, leads to the realization of the true self and “on realizing the religious stage, he places both life’s moment of pleasure as well as ethical principles in the context of his relation with God” (Obinyan, 2014, p. 6). In the matter of constituting a meaningful way of life, every individual has the option to choose any commitment proposed by Kierkegaard for self-fulfillment.

Akram (2022) explored in her article the universal adaptability of Austen’s fictional works. As highlighted in this article, two narratives, *Austenistan* (2018) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), portrayed the idea that Jane Austen’s works could fit into any cultural environment. Akram highlighted Conrad’s comment about Austen in her article, “What is all this about Jane Austen? What is there in her? What is it all about?” (p. 95). Themes related to middle-class families, mothers searching for a good match for their daughters, love affairs, class and societal pressure make her work adaptable across different cultures.

Writing about *Austenistan* (2018), “Though the settings are contemporary, the problems encountered by the Regency-era heroines closely parallel the society Sukhera and her co-authors experience in Pakistan” (Akram, 2022, p. 96). *Bride and Prejudice* is a romantic Bollywood TV series that portrays Indian society in particular and the South Asian region in general with regard to the institution of marriage. Akram has quoted the director of the movie, Gurinder Chadha, “I chose *Pride and Prejudice* because I feel 200 years old; England was no different than Amritsar today. Once I had set up the idea that the Bennets would become the Bakshis from Amritsar, it was easy to adapt the novel” (Akram, 2022, p. 96). This article highlights Austen’s adaptability across different circumstances. Likewise, the present study views *Austenistan* (2018) as adaptable in Pakistani society.

Khan (2021) compares *Austenistan* (2018) with Jane Austen’s works to identify differences and common features and themes. The female protagonists are the central figures in Austen’s works. Khan has highlighted different perspectives on Eastern society, similar to those in the West, in this article. One of which is education. The upper strata of Pakistani society idealizes the education system of the UK or the US. “The indication that grace cannot be attained in Pakistan verifies the claim that *Austenistan*’s characters regard Pakistan as lacking in taste” (p. 33). The study also shows that admiration for the West, resulting from a long period of colonialism, led to a persistent preference for the West.

The present study, on the other hand, highlights that although individuals from the upper strata of society admire the West, they cannot practice its norms and culture in the East. There are certain dominant power structures in society, such as ethical, cultural, moral and financial ones, that restrain individuals from exercising free will.

Individuals are under the control of certain dominant forces around them, such as social, moral, cultural and financial forces, that hinder an individual's exercise of free will and enjoyment of that liberty. In other words, the unavoidable forces abolish the idea of a single individual who attempts to give meaning to life by exercising free will. The study uses the term 'unavoidable' to describe these institutions, as their power and control may lead individuals to give up their desires.

Existing published literature on *Austenistan* primarily analyzes the anthology through the lenses of adaptation studies, feminist resistance, class issues, patriarchal systems, and the localization of Jane Austen in Pakistani society. These studies are insightful, as they show how the stories depict social hierarchy, gender roles, marriage customs, and the pressure to conform to respectability norms. However, they often overlook the characters' individual existential conditions, particularly how their ability to choose is constrained by social, moral, cultural, and economic forces. Similarly, research on Kierkegaardian existentialism tends to focus on the philosophical aspects of aesthetic, ethical, and religious modes of existence, with little discussion of their application in contemporary Pakistani fictional works. This study aims to fill that gap in the existing body of knowledge by analyzing selected short stories from *Austenistan* through Kierkegaard's concepts of free will and modes of existence, demonstrating that characters' desires, choices, anxieties, and resignations are not merely social reactions but existential struggles influenced by prevailing power structures.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study uses Kierkegaard's (1845) three modes of existence as a framework to analyze the selected short stories in *Austenistan* (2018). Danish philosopher and theologian, Kierkegaard, the 'father of existentialism', is of the view that these three stages, the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages, will lead an individual to carry out his free will.

The aesthetic stage of living is characterized by seeking pleasure. At this stage, they often feel what Kierkegaard calls angst (Hong, 1988). It is a sense of internal void one feels. People try to pursue all the pleasures in their lives, but sooner or later, it ends, and they return to their inner sense of vacuum. Individuals experience a sense of loneliness after experiencing pleasure. This aesthetic sense paves the way for the ethical and religious mode of existence.

The ethical stage is when a person has a developed sense of right and wrong. It is a rational stage. This mode of living is characterized by a sense of duty and responsibility to fulfill moral obligations. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gupta, 1969) argues that “in the ethical mode of existence we are still actualizing our commitment to duty in the present” (Gupta, 1969, p. 22).

Religious mode of living is marked by the ‘leap of faith’ which is above rationality. It is the authentic commitment to one’s faith. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gupta, 1969) asserts that religion brings individuals back to the moment when they have to take a leap of faith (Gupta, 1969). Kierkegaard holds that individuals move through these stages through their personal decisions. It gives the sense of existentialism that one has the choice to make decisions and give meaning to life.

The consequences of all our actions result from the exercise of our free will. It is the independent choices that an individual makes above the social, religious and ethical constraints. Kierkegaard coined the term ‘single individual,’ which led to the notion that people were responsible for their every action. An individual determined his/her own fate. Just like the leap of faith, individuals may surrender to their desires because certain dominant forces prove a hindrance to an individual’s exercise of free choice.

3.2. Research Method

The Toulmin (1979) model of argumentation is used as a research method. It operates on three primary levels, i.e., claim, grounds and warrant. The claim is a proposition on which the entire research project works. The ‘grounds’ refer to all the evidence and facts that form the basis for a claim, while the warrant is the support system that links the grounds and the claim, hence making the entire argument sound and logical.

The three basic elements of this model help to analyze the argument raised in this study. The claim of this study is whether the dominant power structures prove to be a hindrance in the exercise of free will. The articles mentioned in the literature review make grounds for the claim. However, analysis of the selected short stories in *Austenistan* (2018), within the framework of Kierkegaard’s (1845) modes of existence, grounds this study’s claim.

3.3. Research Type

The methodology adopted for the research is qualitative. Qualitative research provides the “evidence that the research design was flexible and the researcher was responsive and adapted to the social circumstances of the study” (Popay & Rogers, 1998). This study is based on the collection of relevant information from different sources. The study provides textual evidence from the short stories to support the arguments.

This study employs a qualitative research method using argumentative analysis. Moreover, the present research falls within the paradigm of social constructivist philosophy. Social constructivists hold that researchers and individuals have background

knowledge of their culture, history and society. They have personal experiences in different social contexts. The researchers' background plays an important role in their interpretations, which arise from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2009).

3.4. Selected Texts

The selected text for the research is the Pakistani fiction anthology *Austenistan* (2018), comprising seven short stories. It is the work published by the Jane Austin Society Pakistan (JASP), in which each story is written by a female member. All the stories are edited by Laaleen Sukhera. These stories represent Pakistani society females, their desires, endeavors and hunt for a good match, the way Austin presented the females of England two centuries back. Five out of seven stories are selected. These include *The Fabulous Banker Boys* by Mahila S Lone, *Emaan Ever After* by Nida Elley, *The Mughal Empire* by Saniyya Gauhar, *The Autumn Ball* by Gayathri Warnasuriya and *Only the Deepest Love* by Sonya Rehman. The present study analyzes the short stories within the framework of Kierkegaard's (1845) modes of existence.

4. Analysis

The analysis adheres to the fundamental premise that the individuals depicted in the selected narratives do not possess absolute agency; instead, their decisions are shaped by familial expectations, social stratification, gender norms, cultural values, economic circumstances, and moral commitments. Employing Kierkegaard's three modes of existence as the theoretical framework, the section investigates how characters navigate between desire, duty, anxiety, resignation, and surrender. The textual evidence from the chosen stories substantiates the argument, while the theoretical framework underpins the interpretation of these literary scenarios as existential dilemmas. Consequently, the analysis illustrates that the characters' lack of autonomous free will is not incidental but intrinsically linked to the prevailing social and cultural structures in which they operate.

4.1. Predicaments in the Life of the Characters in *Austenistan*: Exercising Free Will

In this study, characters of Jane Austen, including the protagonists of the stories, are re-envisioned, draped in Pakistani culture that belongs to the upper-class society. All these stories, though, differ in their portrayals of their characters, yet the common ideas juxtapose with Pakistani society, its traditions and cultures. These include the omnipresence of the idea of matchmaking women for their daughters, the courtship to hunt down a man of high social status and financial stability, the admiration for Western Civilization, culture and ways of life and a display of the riches and ego of high-ups in society.

The characters in these stories appear to make choices, yet those choices are rarely independent of the social world surrounding them. Their desires are filtered through family expectations, class consciousness, gender roles, and the fear of losing social respectability.

In this sense, free will in *Austenistan* is not completely absent, but it is constantly negotiated within the limits imposed by society. The characters desire love, marriage, social mobility, recognition, and personal fulfilment, but their decisions are shaped by the standards of the class to which they belong or aspire to belong. This creates an existential conflict between what the individual inwardly desires and what society outwardly demands. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, this conflict becomes important because the individual's struggle for selfhood is repeatedly interrupted by external expectations that define what is acceptable, respectable, and desirable.

Moreover, the selected stories show that exercising free will becomes especially difficult when personal desire clashes with social obligation. The characters do not simply choose according to their inner convictions; instead, they often submit to the pressures of family reputation, marriage expectations, financial status, and cultural propriety. Their movement among pleasure, duty, and resignation reflects Kierkegaard's modes of existence, particularly the tension between the aesthetic desire for personal happiness and the ethical demand to fulfill social responsibility. Therefore, the predicaments faced by the characters are not merely romantic or domestic complications; they are existential situations in which individuals must confront the limits of their freedom. *Austenistan* thus presents Pakistani upper-class society as a space where free will exists, but only within boundaries already marked by tradition, class, morality, and social surveillance.

4.2. Maintenance of Status Quo

The foundation of a society is built on a family system, its values and norms. This way of life encompasses a wide array of social relationships rooted in mores and traditions. Johnson et al. (2013) support this view by arguing that "every family is both a unique microcosm and a product of a larger cultural context" (p. 632). People set their own standards of living by maintaining a certain position in society.

The Baig's family in the story *The Fabulous Banker Boys* is a well-reputed family because the character Javed is a Civil Servant and has "got a plum posting in Lahore with a government bungalow" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 10). As parents to the four girls, Javed and his wife, Jameela, try to be vigilant in their choices across every aspect of life to live a respectable life in society. This behavior can be understood through Alba et al. (2014), who explain that "the notion of 'status display' refers to how much people like to present an image of themselves as conspicuously successful or superior" (p. 7). After Javed's retirement, Jameela ensures that she maintains her house and its interior the same way as before because she wants to get her daughters married, for which displaying status is required to attract people.

Emaan has a status complex as she returns from London and is the daughter of the richest man in town. Emaan's vulnerability to social judgment is revealed in the narrator's observation that "being thirty-two and divorced in Karachi society requires your

dermatologist and personal trainer on speed dial. Don't judge —the competition is twenty-two" (Sukhera, 2018, p.55). Now that she has a Western-style mindset, she keeps her distance from those below her rank and usually avoids socializing. On the other hand, she tries to present herself as an independent lady who does not care about being a divorcee. Her attitude reflects what Alba et al. (2014) describe as "the desire to obtain high status, anxiety about having low status, and delighting in and displaying signs of high status may all be ways in which evolved psychological mechanisms drive individuals to obtain higher rank" (p. 8). Status consciousness is the reason behind Emaan's attitude towards people in her community.

Likewise, the upper class makes sure that its monopoly on culture and ethos goes unchallenged. They also make sure any voices raised against this monopoly are stifled, so that no harm is caused to their status quo. This connection between class and identity is supported by Aries and Seider (2007), who argue that "social class may operate not only as an independent variable that shapes the self, but also as a domain of identity exploration" (p. 3). *The Mughal Empire* is where one sees a continuous effort by Kamila Mughal to prevent damage to the prestige of her family, as she is not considered by Faysal Dayyan for marriage. Her ego does not allow her to mingle with others, even though she has a dire need to be accompanied by someone other than Dayyan. Kamila's class consciousness is reinforced when the narrator notes that "Jahangir Mughal had bought the largest, grandest house on the Margalla Road, one that, in his daughters' view, befitted their status" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 77). Belonging to a wealthy and influential class, Kamila's pride and ego do not allow her to project an image of heartbreak and dejection. Stewart and Ostrove (1993) explain this link between class and self-perception by stating that "class can shape, constrain and mediate the development and expression of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, motives, traits and symptoms" (p. 476). There is a constant battle between her pride and self-worth due to her financial standing in society.

Additionally, as pride and prestige are among the obstacles, reputation is another. Sukhera foregrounds this logic of respectability by stating that "in *Austenistan*, reputation is important to a woman's future" (Sukhera, 2021, p. 4). Maya is a traditional-cum-Western wife in *The Autumn Ball*. It is because, though she is Pakistani-born, she goes abroad and lives in London. Marrying Hugo, who is a diplomat and a man of the upper class, is a matter of immense pleasure for her. But she has to consider her husband's professional life and act accordingly. Maya's dependence on Hugo's professional identity becomes clear when Hugo tells her that "it would be a problem, Hugo said, as a 'trailing spouse,' the wife of a diplomat, she wasn't allowed to work unless it was for a charity or the embassy" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 101). Even though Maya belonged to the upper-middle class, after getting married, she could not pursue a profession of her own choice because it depended on Hugo's reputation.

4.3. Finding a Suitable Match for Daughters in Upper Class Society

Khan (2021) summarizes the marriage anxiety central to the text when he observes that “the worry to wed marks a marriage proposal feels like an accomplishment” (p. 3). For this purpose, based on mere aesthetics is not enough to get a life partner. It is a whole struggle that, most of the time, leads to a leap of faith. Wooing practices are commonly observed to fulfill this desire. Mothers in the upper-class society are equally supportive of this stance.

In one of the stories, *The Fabulous Banker Boys*, Mrs. Baig’s attempt to secure class-appropriate marriages for her daughters is shown when she tells Javed, “I tell him to be more sociable, to make friends who might be useful to the rest of us, but does he listen? No!” (Sukhera, 2018, p.14). The husbands are pressured by their wives to establish relationships with people of their class or higher to settle their daughters. In *Austenistan*, it is evident that although the spinsters, even in their twenties, are independent and headstrong, their elders try to instill cultural and societal norms in their minds.

Getting married is considered an inescapable life work by the people in the Eastern part of the World. The cultural pressure placed on unmarried women is further expressed in the following advice: “The problem with girls like you is that you don’t know how to fish! You think the fish will simply swim your way. They won’t! Fish are dumb by nature. Remember that. They need to be baited!” (Sukhera, 2018, p.95). For Kamila Mughal, things do not work out as she thought they would. Her luck in her affiliation with Dayyan does not support her. Mrs. Bilal in *The Mughal Empire* suggests to Kamila that she think about the guy and move forward with a patch-up; in return, she has nothing but a provocative response.

This aspect of admiration and getting married does not come without hurdles. Samina admires Hashim at first sight. This sudden interaction leads to the development of intimate feelings for both. However, her morality and ethos do not allow Samina to openly express her feelings to Hashim. On the other hand, he too seems reluctant to tell her explicitly. Derber (1979) explains that “attention-dynamics are shaped by cultural values, character structure, and the distribution of power” (p. 79). It is a common fact of Pakistani societies that in the majority of people, there is the element of shyness and cultural borders that are erected. Samina’s restrained desire is revealed when she confesses, “letting my guard down felt good. But at the same time, I felt exposed and vulnerable. Every stupid love song reminded me of Hashim – his brown eyes, his neatly cropped beard, and most of all, his attentiveness” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 128).

4.4. Ethnic, Cultural and Geographical Ties

There is a strong sense of association among people of every land with their ethnicity and culture, shaped by their geography. It provides people with a sense of identity. Alund (1999) explains the connection between culture, identity, and origin by

arguing that “culture is usually connected with ethnicity and race and understood as pure, as an 'essence', as related to some original and eternal ethnic core” (p. 3). Despite the fact that with the passage of time, upcoming generations alienate themselves from their culture, the essence still remains.

In the story *The Fabulous Banker Boys*, Leena is the youngest child in Baig’s family and has extended family ties to Dilawar, a boy from the affluent class. For the family, this is not considered a good sign, as the family’s reputation is not supposed to be compromised. The family’s fear of public judgment reflects the social nature of identity, as Shari and Parveen (2023) note: “from the very beginning, we mix our sense of who we are with how we think others see us—it’s like we’re both looking at ourselves and being looked at by others at the same time” (p. 6). From the community’s perspective, it is a matter of a family’s honor and integrity. That is why Elisha tries to cover the situation. Elisha’s anxiety about family honour is dramatized when she thinks, “What the hell was she doing, behaving like she was in a music video at a wedding full of friends, family and not-so-well-wishers?” (p. 24). Elisha, here is an example of a conventional woman who fulfills her responsibilities in protecting her family’s honor.

However, unlike the conventions, the story *Emaan Ever After* portrays admiration for the West as unacceptable in the East. Emaan’s conflict between Westernized desire and Pakistani social codes appears in the narrator’s observation: “For a society filled with secret swinger clubs and multiple dating apps, it’s still unseemly for a woman to publicly swipe right” (Sukhera, p. 68). Emaan, who spends her time abroad in London, has a Western mindset. Being a divorcee, back in Karachi, she promulgates the same behavior where she tries to indulge in inappropriate acts with Mustafa. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gardiner) writes, “the man who lives aesthetically is not really in control, either of himself or his situation” (Gardiner, 2006, p. 61). That’s how, keeping the cultural and moral ethos at the forefront, Haroon tries to make her realize that this is inappropriate behavior in this part of the world and tries to protect her from evil doings.

The broader disciplinary nature of social life is captured by Bevir (1999), who argues that “modern society supervises all aspects of our life. A host of rules govern not only prisons, but also schools, factories, hospitals, the military, and other institutions” (p. 6). Kamila’s false pretense in “The Mughal Empire” is yet another stance on cultural ethos. Just because it was a matter of family, Kamila had to put on a happy face at the wedding ceremony of a person for whom she imagined herself. Kamila’s forced performance of dignity is exposed in the remark, “But your magnificent performance at Faisal’s wedding went a long way in confusing people” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 79).

Similarly, Samina’s mother was the victim of an abusive marriage, yet she tried to compromise until she came to know that her husband had been cheating on her for quite a

long time. She would bear his beatings and was traumatized. Noor (2004) shares her stance as:

It is tough to be a woman in Pakistan. It is like being born with a permanent disadvantage that lasts till the woman dies. Society and culture work hand in hand against the common Pakistani woman. When husbands, fathers and relatives traumatize them, where could these women go and what could they do? (Noor, 2004, p. 11)

Going through this traumatic married life, unable to exercise free will and live according to her own desires, Samina's mother surrendered to her fate. The consequences of this marriage are that it created distance between all the members of the family. Samina dislikes her father. Samina's emotional alienation from her father is conveyed when she remembers, "I touched my father's face with my thumb, hoping to rake up the last few dregs of love in my heart for him. But there was no trace of me in his shiny eyes, or of the life he had in Pakistan" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 123).

4.5. Frequent Reference to Class and Ego

Based on financial position, people identify their social standing. Lamont and Morner (as cited in Bourdieu, 1984) outline, "dominant groups generally succeed in legitimizing their own culture and ways as superior to those of lower classes" (Lamont & Morner, 2002, p. 6).

No doubt that all of humanity is divided into a class system based on financial status, mentality and association with established, affluent groups in society. The double standard of class privilege is made explicit in the observation that "It's different when Old Lahore or the children of the very affluent are spotted drinking and dancing, pressed up against some other rich kid – people only criticize who they dare" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 26). The objectionable behavior of the upper class usually becomes the provenance of unethical behavior. That is why the entire society keeps a check on their every move and gets highlighted.

Gibbons and Buunk (1999) write that social comparison orientation refers to individuals comparing themselves with others and ranking themselves within society. Emaan refers to her socially upper strata in *Emaan Ever After* when she introduces her friend, Saba. "Saba has finally made her entrance in a Sana Safinaz cocktail dress, bearing a Bottega knot clutch and enveloped in a cloud of Miss Dior" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 63). Being a Princeton graduate and a returnee to Pakistan from London after a considerable period, Emaan's temperament and disposition have changed significantly, and she now deals with people according to their class and status.

Likewise, Crocker and Major (1989) write that membership in the lower strata of a society does not necessarily lead to lower self-esteem because people have developed strategies for self-protection against others' prejudice. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gupta),

“The world is something that offers all sorts of enticing pleasures, yet these are “frauds” that “ensnare” us, in that they lead only to despair” (Gupta, 1969, p. 33). *The Autumn Ball* portrays the elite society of Islamabad, where people have a continuing struggle to get on the bandwagon of reputation in terms of wealth and class. Consequently, individuals scorn those from comparatively incompetent backgrounds. Maya’s humiliation by elite women is captured in Salma’s insulting question, “Oh, your father was an electrician?” Salma had said, with the fascinated tone of one examining someone’s skin disease” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 109). Maya, now the wife of a well-known, professional, affluent man, Hugo, is scorned by the rich ladies of Islamabad for her family background, which is, more or less, inferior to theirs.

Threadcraft (2019) quotes hooks that women need to know that the exercise of this basic personal power is an act of resistance and strength. Samina in the story *Only the Deepest Love* is rendered unconscious due to a strike on her head by one of her students, Asfandiyar. She teaches a class of thirty students, among whom the incompetent and sluggish Asfandiyar gets personal with his teacher, Samina, after she calls him out in class for writing an incoherent, illogical paragraph. He threatens her with his father’s social standing and political connections. It refers to the control of power in a society where the poor are crushed.

4.6. Norms of Family and Married Life

There is a coexistence of modern ways of living and cultural traditions in Pakistan. Marriages are responsibilities that are shaped by people’s standards and mindsets. The modern generation, however, deviates from cultural and societal norms due to the generation gap. “The development of youth culture in the multiethnic city is closely related to the experience of social exclusion” (Alund, 1999, p. 3). Mrs. Baig, in *The Fabulous Banker Boys*, shifts her entire focus to her four daughters to make a perfect match for them with a socially upper-class family. Though the family depends on others to show their affiliation with their daughters, they try everything possible. The Baigs’ belief in education as a route to class mobility is reflected in the narrator’s explanation:

The girls’ private schooling was the one luxury that Jameela and Javed both insisted on for their daughters – Jamila because she knew that if they were to make good matches, they must rub shoulders with the daughters of affluent families (Sukhera, 2018, p. 12)

These social relations are deemed necessary because avoiding certain acts that invite social sanctions requires curbing one’s desires. Emaan, who has spent time abroad and is now grafted back into Pakistani culture, cannot sustain the desires and fun that Westerners enjoy with their friends. Emaan is taken aback by Musti, a wealthy guy who tries to approach her. “I take a deep breath and throw my izzat to the wind. He takes my hand to lead me out” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 67). Haroon, aware of Mustafa’s reputation and

the society where Emaan lives, tries to protect her. Though she makes a fuss of it, she later realizes her mistake.

Sobia is a victim of an ignored, unreciprocated-in-love kind of husband in the story "Only the Deepest Love." Although she has sobbed since her day of marriage, she puts up with her husband, Asad, to keep the marriage alive. "Domestic violence imposed on women in the form of physical violence leads to emotional destruction" (Shah & Riaz, 2022, p. 13). Asad, being gay, does not pay heed to her, which dashes all her expectations from married life, which she had been thinking of for her entire life, to the ground. Sobia's emotional abandonment is voiced through Asad's casual explanation:

I'm so sorry Sobz, but we can sit here and make a thousand assumptions, but... look it's only been a week, – give it a little time. Who knows what's going on with him, maybe it's just something that needs an adjustment period. (Sukhera, 2018, p. 120)

Women are the ones who always need to compromise and bury their husbands' flaws in their hearts for the sake of their married life and children. This demonstrates that married life within the selected narratives is not depicted as a voluntary partnership between equals; rather, it emerges as a social institution wherein women are anticipated to renounce their desires, emotions, and personal dignity. The ethical responsibility of maintaining the family primarily falls upon women, while male shortcomings are frequently concealed, forgiven, or regarded as normal. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, these women are marginalized from authentic selfhood because their decisions are influenced less by internal conviction and more by social obligation, fear of judgment, and cultural expectations. Consequently, the norms governing family and married life in *Austenistan* operate as dominant structures that inhibit women's free will and compel them to accept compromise as a moral duty.

4.7. Traditions and Social Status to be Maintained

The patriarchal system in Pakistan has pushed women to a subjugated position in society. Though upper-class women are educated, empowered and independent, they must refrain from expressing their desires openly and maintain their gentlewomanly status.

For instance, as Sukhera writes, "The Baigs would be torn to shreds by gossipmongers" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 26). The sensible girl of the family in *The Fabulous Banker Boys*, Elisha, thought that when she saw her mother boasting about her daughters openly in front of women in her circle. The social conventions and rules are what keep people bound to move in a certain direction. The norms limit individuals' freedom to exercise free will. "Cultural sociologists center their attention on how boundaries are shaped by context, and particularly by the cultural repertoires, traditions, and narratives that individuals have access to" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 5).

Eastern culture rejects the Western idea that there can be anything more than friendly relations between males and females. Having relationships outside professional life is not encouraged. Rather, it is viewed as a breach in social norms and a threat to the sanctity of the family. “Always played it safe, made sure I never dated even though my friends jumped from relationship to relationship. I saved myself knowing I was going to give myself to my husband – that’s the way we’ve been raised, haven’t we, Sam?” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 120). Sobia, in the story *Only the Deepest Love* shares her story with her cousin Samina. Her husband, Asad, fails to notice her just because he is gay. Nevertheless, she remains loyal to her husband and waits for him to reciprocate her love.

4.8. Secondary Status of Women in Pakistani Society

Pakistani society, as it is male-dominated, places women as an inferior gender. Despite attempts to bring females to equal status with males, there has been little to no change so far. The stories, though, reflect upper-class and educated families, yet there one can see the dependency of females on their males. Kierkegaard (as cited in Gupta) states about the ethical mode as, “the movement from the aesthetic existence to a moral one requires a determination of will. In order to escape the despair of constant craving, we commit our self to an ethical mode of existence.” (Gupta, 1969, p. 34). The ethical mode is the fulfillment of duties and responsibilities that ultimately impose restrictions on free will.

The pressure to accept traditional womanhood appears when one of the daughters says, “My mother hates that I don’t want to be a housewife, but I keep telling her the world doesn’t revolve around men any longer” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 23). Jameela tries to make sure that, despite her daughters being pretty and having good social standing, they are good at being housewives. They should bow before their husbands, for they will be rich and handsome men, so her daughters will have to compromise, and only then will they be traditional homemakers. Maya’s limited social identity as a woman is condensed in her statement: “No matter what career a woman has, in this country, you’re either known as someone’s daughter or someone’s wife. That’s why I never even bothered working” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 83). ‘*The Mughal Empire*’ is a true depiction of Pakistani society in this regard as well, where a female is regarded by her guardian. Threadcraft (2019) quotes hooks in saying that “many poor and exploited women, especially non-white women, would have been unable to develop positive self-concepts if they had not exercised their power to reject the powerful’s definition of their reality” (p. 4). The dilemma of power remains the same throughout the World, but Westerners can more easily protest than Eastern women because culture and ethos matter greatly in this part of the World. Even if she herself is an independent and well-off woman, yet an Eastern woman carries the name of a male member of the family with her.

Similarly, Hugo tries to persuade his wife Maya that “as a diplomat’s wife, you had to be discreet” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 107). There seems to be a blurred line between professional life and an independent social life in high society. This inequality leads to the subjugation of women, leading to their inability to exercise free will. As Mill puts it;

All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds (Mill, 2006, p. 17)

Moreover, Khan (2021) argues that “common people in Pakistan consider marriage as an inescapable vocation” (p. 3). As Betty Friden calls it ‘feminine fulfillment’, young girls are taught housekeeping and daily chores, taking care of and obeying their husbands and their entire families, and bowing before their every order. Samina recalls her mother’s relationship with her father in *Only the Deepest Love*. “I’d never say it, but sometimes I even blamed her for leaving him, though most of the time, I was angry that she’d spent so much time in an abusive marriage with the man” (p. 122). Samina’s father falls in love with Rebecca when she visits Pakistan as a journalist. While he would beat Samina’s mother, yet she stands loyal in her abusive marriage. “His eyes, blazing black with hatred, reminded me of Papa barging through the house, breaking vases, plates, my mother’s crystal decoration pieces; flinging them at my mother” (p. 124). In such a situation, the women are supposed to compromise in their marriage for the sake of their children and surrender to fate.

4.9. Financial Constraints Leading to a Subjugated Position in Society

The financial dimension of social restriction can be framed through Alba et al. (2014), who argue that “status hierarchies are a widespread element in human society, and thus from an evolutionary perspective it is clear why humans should be concerned about their rank within the hierarchies that pervade our social world” (p. 4). It is not wrong to say that an individual’s financial status determines the future. As this element is portrayed in *Austenistan*: “Such eligible boys have arrived from Dubai for the Mirza wedding! You must make sure we are invited so they have a chance to meet our girls” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 14). Jamila Baig’s only concern is to wed off her daughters in upper-class families. For this purpose, she tries hard to maintain the setup of her house after retirement of her husband. She makes sure that all her daughters look good when they attend Mirza’s daughter’s wedding.

The association with a class determines people’s future based on wealth and riches. *The Mughal Empire* hints at this notion that it is also an impediment when one cannot find a good match that aligns with their family. As one of the characters in the story says:

A woman should never marry beneath her social class. A rich woman can only marry a rich man or the son of a rich man if she wants to be happy, that is. And there are few people around who are as rich or richer than Daddy. And so, for someone like me, the pond is actually a puddle (Sukhera, 2018, p. 82)

It is clear that the proud and class-conscious Kamila considers Erum and her family as incompetent and would scorn them for their dress sense and overall standing in society. "Social class may operate not only as an independent variable that shapes the self, but also as a domain of identity exploration" (Aries & Seider, 2007, p. 3). Though Erum's father is a civil servant, she compares them to her billionaire father, Jahangir Mughal, a businessman who looks down on them. "Before marrying up, Erum and her sisters would get their clothes embroidered by cheap karigars in Islamabad's F-10 market who copied designer outfits from magazines. From rags to riches" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 76). The common conception that only "the rich leaves will drink the rain" is what Kamila carries in her mind. Erum, being socially lower than her, should be considered ineligible. "Remember those hideous chappals she was wearing from Paradise Shoe Palace when we first met her?" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 80).

This power domain, in the form of financial status in society, is further depicted in another story, *Only the Deepest Love*. Due to its financially privileged position in society, the upper class has a strong hold over others, takes the law into its own hands, and its crimes are often overlooked. "Never forget your place, you nobody," he screamed, "I can have you picked up, raped and torn limb from limb!" (p. 124). Asfandiyar, being financially strong, has the power to humiliate and threaten his teacher even within the institute. On the other hand, Samina also fears him because she is helpless, and he is the son of a politician and landlord.

4.10. Unexpected Occasions Leading to Unforeseen Outcomes

There are times when individuals want to exercise their liberty and give physical shape to their desires by pursuing them. But, not all the time do circumstances favor. Just as Kierkegaard puts the 'leap of faith' in religion, where individuals surrender and bow before their God, so too one has to surrender to one's idea of exercising free will. The reality is that people face the dominant forces in society one way or another. As in these stories from *Austenistan*, one can take notes on the lives of different characters. Jameela's helplessness before circumstance is expressed in the line, "Still, she couldn't help but feel that fate had been a little cruel" (Sukhera, 2018, p. 9). Jameela Baig had to wait 10 years into her marriage to conceive a child. *The Fabulous Banker Boys* depicts the fact that the entire family has to go through a certain occasion where they have to accept the reality. "Every time Jameela miscarried and cried hysterically, Javed disconnected from reality a little more and distanced his wife by shutting himself off in his study. He didn't know how

to comfort her” (p. 10). These circumstances are proof that the family has to give up on their struggles and accept the reality of powerlessness.

Emaan in *Emaan Ever After*, an independent, well-off lady, is a returnee to Pakistan from London and a divorcee. Despite the reality that she values her ego and social standing, she cannot help her fate. As Shah and Riaz (2022) put it, “Traditional Pakistani society considers marriage in which a woman marries an individual of her choice sacrilegious” (p. 4). She unknowingly falls for her friend Haroon and develops feelings for him. “He became my person, and though he usually had some sort of relationship on the go, it never spilled over into our special space” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 72). But she cannot achieve her desire to get him. Just as Kierkegaard asserts (as cited in Gupta), “The religious stage recovers, in fact, redoubles, what has been lost” (p. 36). As an individual takes a leap of faith and surrenders all matters to God, Emaan, too, has to surrender to her aspirations and leave for London, as she cannot attend his wedding. But luck has another plan for them. The unforeseen turn of events appears when Emaan reacts to Haroon’s arrival by saying, “What! What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be getting married!” (Sukhera, 2018, p. 74). Haroon takes a flight to London in order to surprise Emaan there and express his true feelings to her.

5. Conclusions

The Kierkegaardian existentialist notion of life holds that an individual goes through three stages: aesthetic, ethical and religious. An individual’s personality and the outcomes of their actions are based on choices and the exercise of free will. The present study advanced the argument that, although men were born free, they could not freely exercise their liberty. Certain dominant forces in society restricted individuals and prevented them from enjoying the liberty of free will. These restrictions led individuals to surrender to their desires and impulses, as they could not exercise free will.

The present study highlighted dominant societal forces, in the form of ethical, moral, financial and cultural values, in the lives of characters in *Austenistan* (2018). These power structures bound and restricted individuals, requiring them to follow a certain path. As culture played a pivotal role in society, it made individuals adhere to its rules and customs. The maintenance of the status quo and class required continuous effort and the suppression of certain desires to maintain reputation in society. Unlike the idea that individuals find the aesthetic appeal they seek in everything around them, the characters in this anthology faced circumstances in which they could not exercise their free will and surrendered their desires and sense of freedom.

The impediment of prime importance, according to the study, was the modern society, its rules and regulations and the mindset of its people, which proved to be the major element that restricted the liberty of individuals to live their lives according to their

desires. As Bevir (1999) said, society supervised us all, and its rules governed every institute of life.

The study highlighted the other dominant power structure in society, which is patriarchy, that kept a strong hold on the lives of others as portrayed in these stories. As Noor (2004) stated, it was like a 'permanent disadvantage' for a woman who was born in Pakistan because here the culture and society do not support their rights. This could be seen in the story *The Autumn Ball*, where Maya compromised on all her desires for her husband. This showed that, unlike the West, the women in the East are subjugated by their marital bond.

The study concluded that the social, moral, financial and cultural forces around an individual hindered their life and thus prevented them from exercising their free will. The individuals gave up the idea of enjoying the liberty of free will and surrendered to these forces. Alienation from society was still an option for individuals, but conforming to social values made the denial of these forces impossible.

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