SUBVERSION OF PRE-DEFINED FEMALE GENDER ROLES IN PAKISTANI SOCIETY: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *THE SHADOW OF THE CRESCENT MOON, BUTTERFLY SEASON* AND *STAINED*

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Abstract

The present research aspires to represent the subversion of pre-defined gender roles in the novels; The Shadow of the Crescent Moon (2013) by Fatima Bhutto, Butterfly Season (2014) by Natasha Ahmed, and Stained (2016) by Abda Khan. The researchers had tried to depict the destabilization of gender-based stereotyped identity from the Pakistani perspective. The selected method of study was Feminist Analysis by Tyson (2006), which examined literature as a medium to represent feminist issues, whereas; the theoretical angle of "Matrix of Domination" from Collins' (2004) Feminist/Gender theory was used as a principle to analyze and depict the subversion of pre-defined gender roles in the selected novels. Present study aimed to establish the notion of gender as a social construct that could be subverted through literary discourses that have the potential to challenge the power-based gender roles within a patriarchal society. In this regard, different critical works of prominent theorists and writers had been discussed briefly in the literature review to project the significance of the works by contemporary Pakistani women writers as a medium to subvert identities formed by their society. Gender was also a means of power, through which the dominant sought to control the subordinate. The objective of the research was to suggest that gender is socially constructed, therefore, it can be deconstructed through literature. The selected novels exemplify the current gender inclinations of today's Pakistan with the pen of female writers. Stereotyped gender identity is a socially constructed vice that divides humans into segments, hence it is required of the contemporary discourses to decenter such power discourses that perpetuate hegemonic boundaries and restrict the women into social shackles of imposed identities.

***Keywords*:** Gender, subversion, patriarchy, power, woman

Introduction

South Asian literature is rich and profound in every respect depicting the socio-cultural, political, and religious perspectives of the region. Following the same trends of South Asian literature, Pakistani women writers are playing a tremendous role not only to project

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Pakistani women but also to depict the social issues related to women of Pakistan. These women writers are among those whose works stand out in the field of women's writing.

The chosen works exemplify Pakistani women authors in South Asian literature. They represent the issues of women living in Pakistani society. They show the struggles and hardships that women go through, and talk about the bravery and strength of the women who fight for their rights and freedom. The notion of empowerment is a far cry for them they have to compete with the male strata of Pakistani society whose culture is patriarchal to the core. These women have to build in a revolutionary aptitude for claiming their rights of citizenship, and to get dominant social status in order to adopt male-oriented professions. Their lives are tales of revolution in every aspect whether domestic, socio-economic, or political. Their quest is for existence, survival, and equality in a society. Yet their tales are success stories, marking their impact for the generations to come.

The selected novels are representatives of the deconstruction of pre-defined gender roles. The heroines of these novels have challenged the stereotyped gender roles and predicted the women of today who are daring enough to step out of their pre-defined roles. This study is important because it uses feminist analysis as a method and gender theory as a theoretical framework to look at some novels that have not been looked at before through the chosen theory and method. Both the novels are recent literary works and the first books by the mentioned authors; therefore, less research is available on these novels, which is also a significance of this study. There is no scholarly research available on *Butterfly Season* (2014) by Ahmed and *Stained* (2016) by Khan. Therefore, the present study asserts to be pioneer research on these two novels while fewer research works are accessible on *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) by Bhutto that has been added in the literature review. Gender-based identity is immensely a complex phenomenon that varies from culture to culture, therefore this paper is delimited to the destabilization of gender-based stereotyped identity within the Pakistani perspective.

Literature Review

The following literature review is based on the theoretical paradigm and available research studies based on the selected novels. Patricia Hill Collins is very much known for her critical works grounded in black women's feminism. Her first book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) is based on the exclusion of black women from intellectual discourses (Appelrouth and Edles 2010).[1] Apart from black feminism, she has added much into the realm of feminist theory; the feminist theoretical paradigms such as standpoint epistemology and matrix of domination presented by her are quite influential and intellectual. Her critical works are mostly based on Postmodern perspectives, therefore they deconstruct the stereotyped version of gender roles; she has specifically conceptualized the standpoint theory and

[1]Sott Appelrouth, and Laura Desfor Edles, *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era: Text and Reading*. (California State University, Northridge: Sage, 2010)

Postmodernism (Collins 1998).[2] According to Collins (2004)[3], a critical theory is critical only when it has a commitment to justice not only for one's group but for all. She suggests, "…bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people differently placed in specific political, social, and historical contexts characterized by injustice" illume the critical social theory. She discards a dichotomous way of thinking about domination instead she propagates and privileges the differences in race, class, and gender.

Similarly, the notion Matrix of Domination accentuates the position of any individual in a society that is made up of several adjoining standpoints rather than only one vital standpoint. Hence, this assertion by Collins dismantles the idea that power maneuvers from the top down by coercing and controlling the reluctant victims to obey the powerful superiors. Collins further states that "depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives" (Collins 1990)[4]. In the same context, she declares that, "people simultaneously experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions". The same precept works at the level of the individual as well through "the power of the self-definition" (Collins 2004)[5] and "self-defined standpoint" (Collins 1998), for "each individual has a unique personal biography made up of concrete experiences, values, motivations, and emotions" (Collins 1998).[6] A similar angle from the Matrix of Domination has been adopted by the researchers to represent the destabilization of power-based stereotyped gender roles within a Pakistani patriarchal society through the selected novels.

The Feminist Analysis according to Tyson (1998) "examines how literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women".[7] It is exclusive of the Feminist approach to comprehend and characterize woman's point of view. This approach elucidates the women writing stratagems concerning their social situations. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the gender roles that construct masculine and feminine identities within literary discourses and the marginalization of literary works produced by women. Hence, Feminist criticism tends to be the most suitable approach to analyze gender discrimination in a patriarchal society, as it pays much importance to the social construction of gender identity and gender roles. Patriarchy is a male authoritative system where the male power is absolute whether in the form of father, brother, husband, or son. People believe that a patriarchal

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[2] Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)
[3] Patria Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*. (New York, London: Routledge, 2004) 305
[4] Patricia Hill Collins, *The Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1990) 226-227
[5] Patria Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*. (New York, London: Routledge, 2004)306
[6] Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 47
[7] Lois Tyson, *Critical theory today: A user friendly guide*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1998) 81

society begins or is established when males take control of the social order, vital accomplishments, and historic happenings are accredited to the men. A patriarchal system believes that women are lesser than men, hence, they are bound to be inferior and subordinate to men. Feminist criticism challenges such pre-defined notions of masculinity and femininity. A Feminist approach deconstructs the power-based gender roles that tend to subjugate women.

The Shadow of the Crescent Moon (2013) is a debut novel by Fatima Bhutto it has multidimensional critical standpoints yet very few scholarly works are available on the novel. Jadoon, Wasim, and Imtiaz (2018)[8] have analyzed the novel through psychological analysis about the war on terror. They assert that *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) represents the fixed ideas about the war on terror. Their analysis reveals social and political relationships and institutions within which the evil conflict of war on terror thrives.

> … she draws into our imagination the understanding and reality of the War on Terror, and to those who are its worst victims. For Bhutto, the psychological understanding of the worst victims of war on terror reveal that neither West not the Pakistani state has suffered those dire consequences that the youth of the tribal areas face. As consequence of this unending war, their fate is sealed as lost generation', both as a result of denial of justice, and the destruction caused by war on terror.

Siddique (2020)[9] has researched the novel based on Foucault's notion of subject and power from a new historicism perspective. The researcher has tried to depict the actual picture of Pakistani society concerning Fatima Bhutto's personal life experiences. The study has also dismantled the stereotypes associated with Pakistani women apart from depicting the colonial/postcolonial parameters in tribal areas of Pakistan. Lamichhane (2017)[10] has analyzed the issue of cultural hegemony in the novel:

> It aims at countering some of the claims and assumptions mentioned about the superiority of foreign culture and people in the dominant mainstream cultural discourses. This novel describes the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, who manipulate the culture of that society, their beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores. So, that their ruling-class worldview becomes the worldview that is to force and accepted as the cultural norm; as the universally valid dominant ideology that justifies the social, political, and economic status. In this regard, this research examines ideology operated covertly and overtly robbing the freedom and choices of the people.

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[8] Aisha Jadoon, Samia Wasif, and Uzma Imtiaz. Literary Response to the War on Terror: A Psychological Analysis. *Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)*, no 3.4, (2018): 380

[9] A. Siddique, Rediscovering Women's Writing Research Paper, (2020)

[10] T. P. Lamichhane, *Critique of cultural hegemony in Bhutto's the shadow of the crescent moon*, (2017): 1

Theoretical Perspective and Research Method

The selected novels are analyzed through the theoretical framework of Matrix of Domination by Collins (2004) grounded in the Feminist/Gender theory with Feminist Analysis by Tyson (2006) as the method of analysis. Feminist Analysis is an approach that seeks to utilize literature in a social context with the support of different disciplines that includes sociology, linguistics, history, and psychology. Therefore, the tool of analysis is literature itself that does not only represent but also subverts the pre-defined gender roles and power structures, thus this research has scrutinized and portrayed the deconstruction of pre-defined gender roles in the above-mentioned novels through the application of Feminist Analysis.

Following research questions are formulated based upon the above discussed review of literature:

Q1. How do the selected novels represent the female gender dispositions of contemporary Pakistani society to project gender as a social construct?

Q2. How stereotyped power-based gender identity is subverted through the selected novels?

Analysis and Discussion

The Shadow of the Crescent Moon (2013)[11] by Bhutto is a novel set in the town of Mir Ali, near the Afghan border. The town is situated somewhere in the tribal area of Waziristan. It is the story of three brothers and two young women shackled within a Pashtun tribal system. The opening lines of the novel depict a society under the threat of attacks that is also conservative to its core. The three brothers Aman, Hayat, and Sikandar are shown going for Eid prayers to different mosques for "it is too dangerous, too risky, to place all the family together in one mosque that could easily be hit". Aman, Erum and his love, Samarra, had just returned from studying in the United States. Soon the readers come to know that Hayat the youngest brother is a Shia separatist and a senior underground operator who befriends Samarra. Samarra has shown tremendous courage to befriend Hayat after the betrayal of his elder brother in a tribal male dominant society.

Samarra is also one of the bold activists who have nothing to lose for their cause, for which she has been picked up, interrogated, and tortured by the authorities. Her character incorporates male dominance and empowerment that challenges the stereotyped gender roles. She speaks of the misplaced identities of a generation lost in the politics of war, which is usually associated with the qualities of the male revolutionary character. The lines she has uttered to the officer who beats her during detention project her strength and dominance, "you are the ones who have sold everything in this country you defend so urgently. You sold its gold, its oil, its harbors, even its airspace".[12] Samarra after the

[11] Fatima Bhutto, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. (India: Penguin Books, 2013)121
[12] *Ibid*., 150

betrayal of Aman and the escape of her father opts for a life that isn't meant for women in Mir Ali.

Samarra's character is opposite to the image of women in Pakistani society. She is involved in freedom fighting and goes on expeditions with her father. She used to wear jeans, play cricket, ride a horse and shot bullets. In short, she does everything she has seen her father doing. She is the best example of a female character to break the stereotyped version of a Pakistani woman who is confined in the gender roles pre-defined and imposed by society. She is also involved in the plot of assassination and in leading the whole plot of murder of the chief minister. She is also involved in transporting the documents and radio equipment. "She hadn't told a soul about her second, clandestine, non-house-girl life".[13] She mostly has male friends who smoke cigarettes over a cup of green tea, and she does not cover her hair like other women of the tribe. "They can see you, 'Hayat often tells her. It's dangerous that you do not cover your hair. They recognize you' But Samarra has spent a life lying in wait. She will not hide anymore. Samarra drapes a dark shawl across her shoulders; she wears it as a man does, casually, carelessly".[14] She is not distracted by feminine concerns though in the beginning she is shown waiting for Aman's letters and phone calls fascinated by her marriage thoughts, later after Aman's betrayal she has emerged stronger.

Mina, as Sikandar's wife, and Samarra, as Sikandar's daughter, stand out in this narrative as remarkable and fearless female characters. They represent a strength of mind and heart that is very strange to a region where women are not even allowed to express their thoughts. They are projected as liberated and facilitated women who are not locked up in their homes. They have access to "Tabanna beauty parlor" for "tidily plucked arcs".[15] The character of Mina is the most interesting one because of her intellectual aptitude that enables her to comprehend the changes they must cope with being Shia anti-Taliban in the town of Mir Ali. Although she is seemingly timid, weak, and dependent yet she stands and speaks to the Taliban while accompanying Sikandar in the hospital van. She does all the talking when her husband is beaten to death by the Taliban. She dares to stand and yell at the Taliban, "These men are students of justice. They can be accused of being violent, of being rash, of anything but injustice".[16] Despite her mental condition due to the death of her son she confronts the Talib and tries to rescue her husband. "Mina has got out of the van. She opened her door and pushed Talib with the wispy beard and light blue turban. She pushed him hard, touching him against all conventions, placing her hands flat on his body and straining her arms to push him as forcefully as her strength would allow".[17]

The novel is about a land torn by war and full of struggles and sorrows. Despite the fear and lies of war, Bhutto's portrayal of female characters is top-notch and challenging. As the three brothers are struggling with their burdens, Samarra and Mina act daringly in

[13] *Ibid*.,146
[14] *Ibid*.,14
[15] *Ibid*.,55
[16] *Ibid*.,190
[17] *Ibid*.,191

their fight for justice. Their characters are the signposts to break the stereotyped depiction of gender roles rather these two characters have subverted the power-based gender roles by their valor and strength that is affiliated mainly with the males in a patriarchal society. According to Lamichhan (2017):[18]

> Where she leaves the male characters wanting, Fatima Bhutto paints a beautiful portrayal of the two female characters: Samarra and Mina. Despite their suffering, they are powerful women seeking education and enlightenment. Fatima Bhutto does well to dispel the myth of the mute, domesticated, cowering Pakistani woman by treating us to fiery and feisty women like Mina and Samarra.

It has been observed by some researchers that the character of Samarra has autobiographical elements that is why is has been depicted too strong and bold. As it is asserted by Siddique (2020):[19]

> Reading the novel from new historicist perspective also highlights many of the Bhutto's personal life instances which render more realism to her novel. Bhutto's character Samarra and her actions bear close resemblance to her. Fatima Bhutto lost her father in 1960 as a result of an assassination planned by Bhutto's own intimate relatives. Therefore, Bhutto like Samarra also struggled by addressing in his novel and memoir…

The Butterfly Season (2014)[20] by Ahmed is a romance that breaks the norms and barriers of a patriarchal society. It is simultaneously a story of Rumi's liberation and Ahad's rebounding with his roots. The author's depiction of Rumi's character is bold. The protagonist's social and moral emancipation not only challenges but also dismantles the stereotype of an Eastern woman deemed subordinate to male control. Her aggressiveness is reflected in her choice of clothing as well:

> What do you think of this one? Rumi held up a slim-fitting *kurti* in front of the mirror. It was a deep burgundy, soft silk with long, fitted sleeves, plain except for sparkling silver sequins on a Chinese collar. "That's gorgeous! Where did you get it?" Juveria was lounging on Rumi's bed. After seven years in England….[21]

Rumi is a young Pakistani woman who is on a vacation in London where she meets Ahad, a successful business-person. Ahad is a charming and independent man, who arrests her attention and the relationship moves forward with mounting passions. Rumi has to face the opposition of her sister Javeria and narrow-minded uncle, along with a society that disapproves of pre-marital intimacy. "She was curious about this man that Rumi had been seeing for the past week, but Rumi was being very secretive about him". "And is this the kind of guy who will send a proposal to your family? I think Zahid Chacha would have a

[18] T. P. Lamichhane, *Critique of cultural hegemony in Bhutto's the shadow of the crescent moon*, (2017):1
[19] A. Siddique, Rediscovering Women's Writing Research Paper, (2020) 7
[20] Natasha Ahmed, Butterfly Season (Kindled DX version, 2014)
[21] *Ibid*.,16

heart attack if he ever found out you were dating. You know how conservative he is about these things". [22]

From the streets of London to scorching Karachi, the novel is a story of Rumi's destiny projecting the struggles she fights and challenges she faces. After dating Ahad for some time, she has to decide whether she should sleep with him or not. The discourse of the novel is not only about breaking the taboos, rather it is about finding oneself, learning to love oneself, and accommodating the people for what they are. "I've only known him a week, you know." "So, you're officially *dating* him, then?" Javeria set her mouth in a disapproving line. "I think our family may object to that".[23]

The novel is about taking the challenges life might bring to us as humans. In the course of falling in love, the novel depicts the deconstruction of gender roles for women. "It's not their business, is it?" And you're not going to tell anyone, are you? The unspoken question hovered between them. "Right, but what do you think Baba would say if he were here? We're a middle-class Pakistani family, Rumi. We don't *date*". The novel is also different in its representation of the protagonist. Breaking the stereotypes of males as the main character of the novel has a female protagonist around whom the entire plot revolves. Rumi is projected as a bold and daring woman who has the will to make her own decisions. She is well educated, confident, and courageous, "I know I live with Zahid Chacha, and I am grateful to him for many things. But if Mom were still with us, I know she wouldn't mind. And she's the only one whose opinion would have mattered." "Yeah, well…Mom's liberalism annoyed Baba, you know".[24]

The novel *Stained* (2016)[25] by Khan is a story about an eighteen years old British Pakistani rape survivor. It is a journey of a young female protagonist who has been exploited, yet she is supposed to preserve the family honor by keeping her rape a secret. This is a story of psychological trauma and mental endeavors for existence and survival. In the course of events, the novel deals with several taboo issues major among them are honor and rape. These two issues are not interrelated, but they deal with the stereotyped notion of womanhood that is supposed to be chased and pure. Despite being raped, the women in our society are considered being guilty although they are victims, yet they are treated as if they are themselves responsible for their rapes. This is one of the major reasons that the rape victims avoid reporting the cases and suffer the psychological pressure of their molestation. Honor also deals with the woman if she is raped. She is considered a disgrace to the family, for which mostly she is compelled to remain silent for the sake of the family's so-called honor and respect.

The heroine of the novel Selina Hussain is a rape victim who has to bear the burden of uncommitted crime, and yet she has to remain strong. The novel has deep themes with profound depictions that deconstruct many stereotyped notions. Like the above analyzed novels, this novel also exemplifies a female main character who is placed in challenging

[22] *Ibid*.,17
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid*.
[25] Abda Khan, *Stained*. (Harvard Square Editions: New York, 2016)

situations. Just like Selina, the women of patriarchal societies are mostly double marginalized even being victimized, they have to face the opposition and rebuff from their own families. The struggles that Selina has to endure are evident from the opening lines of the first chapter. It seems that she is running for her life after being abducted, yet metaphorically these lines connote the hardships and challenges she has to face after being kidnapped and raped.

> Run faster! I could hear the words loud in my head as I scurried away. It was a beautiful, warm June evening, but my body was shivering. I was sprinting like a maniac, although I had no idea how, as though some gust of mysterious wind was dragging me along, like a flimsy kite on a string; the kite flies high only because of the wind, but descends lifelessly to the ground without it.[26]

A trusted family friend from the mosque who has offered to teach her the Islamic Sharia has raped her. The readers find her in the middle of her struggles to cope with life wherein she is supposed to avoid the scandal of her rape to prevent her widowed mother from disgrace.

> When I got to the front gate of our old, stone, terraced house, I stopped dead. They could not see me like this. I clung hard to the curls of iron at the top of the gate, the whites of my knuckles protruding, and dimming the redness of the scratches on my hands. I wiped my tears with my sleeve, leant over and slowly opened the gate. I tentatively went up the two stone steps and peered through the letterbox. Neither of them was in the hallway, so I entered the house, painstakingly quietly, and crept up the stairs.27

The story of Selina is a true story for such women do exist and their problems are real. The novel is an effort to acknowledge and give voice to such victims of rape through the story of Selina. Thus, the narrative has highlighted a demanding theme through which it has destabilized gender issues concerning women and projected a woman who has turned out to accept reality. In doing so, the author has postured certain social and moral questions based upon socio-cultural norms and values. The novel gives a message of women's empowerment, self-regulation, and survival through Selina. The transformation that Selina has gone through from a naïve teenage girl to a mature, strong, and endowed woman after her rape is depicted quite well in the concluding part of the novel:

> I looked out of the window, only to see the rain start to come down, when it had been sunny just a few minutes before. Sparkly, baby rain droplets gently fell upon the window, as the sky hurried in its pursuit to change from a hazy blue to a steely grey. After only a few minutes, there were large, angry raindrops mercilessly banging against the window. How quickly a soft, delicate, sunny outlook could transform into a heavy, rough, miserable riot, I thought to myself. I looked at my reflection in the window. How did I end up here? I went from

[26] *Ibid*., p.2
[27] *Ibid*.,3

> being a happy, naive schoolgirl to a woman who had lost so much in what seemed like the blink of an eye. [28]

The findings of this research suggest that gender is a social construct and pre-defined gender roles are worthless when it comes to individual choices. Both men and women have to struggle and face the challenges with an equal amount of valor and courage. Often, it has been observed as the above-analyzed novels have also projected that women are more courageous and daring when it is a matter of survival, endurance, and existence. Bravery, courage, and empowerment are not merely the qualities of men, women could be braver and empowered when compared to men. Hence, socially constructed gender roles are insignificant that are made only to impose the power of men on women to subjugate them. The analyzed novels have also subverted power-based gender identities through the delineation of powerful and strong women characters as heroines of the main plots.

Conclusion

Analysis of the selected novels: *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) Bhutto, *Butterfly Season* (2014), and *Stained* (2016) through Feminist Analysis by Tyson (2006) as a method and Matrix of Domination by Collins (2004), a theoretical framework has represented that literature portrays life and various issues related to human existence. The issues are aptly projected through different literary genres. The novel is one of these genres that have the scope to depict life as it is with all its variations. Similarly, the selected novels have projected and deconstructed gender-based stereotyped roles within Pakistani patriarchal society. The analysis of the novels has brought into notice that even the plots of these three novels are entirely different from each other, the woman characters are placed into different situations and circumstances their fights are completely different from one another but the quest for survival and empowerment is the same. Whether it is Samarra and Mina struggling in the pro-Taliban Mir Ali town or Rumi and Selina living in the modern and advanced cities, the issues of women remain the same. Their fights are similar for it is not the question of existence, rather it is about the destabilization of pre-defined gender roles where power is rested with the male gender and women are subordinated.

The findings of the research are also verified through the theoretical framework of Matrix of Domination that suggests, "people simultaneously experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions" (Collins 1990)[29]. Likewise, the women characters portrayed in the above-analyzed novels have practiced and fought oppression at three levels mentioned by Collins. From the level of a personal biography (experiences) to the levels of cultural context related to gender-based stereotyped identity and the pressures from social setup (institutions) the heroines of the selected novels are the survivors of a battle fought for existence and empowerment.

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[28] *Ibid*.,199

[29] Patricia Hill Collins, *The Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1990) 227

Through the subversion of the power-based gender roles/identities, these women have displayed their powers of self-definition and self-defined standpoints and have substantiated that each of them have a unique persona made up of rough experiences, values, motivations, and emotions.

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