The Economics of Oppression: Domestic Servitude in Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Story of Noble Rot*

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Abstract

This paper examines domestic servitude in Pakistan through Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Story of Noble Rot* (2001), highlighting the exploitation of domestic workers within a deeply stratified society. It scrutinizes the contrasting lives of a domestic worker and a wealthy businessman's wife to explore the rigid master-servant dynamic shaped by economic disparity and patriarchal control. The analysis reveals how patriarchal structures dictate women's roles, showing that wealth does not guarantee autonomy, nor does financial contribution ensure authority within the household. By focusing on the master-servant relationship and broader societal inequalities, the paper uses textual analysis through an intersectional feminist lens to underscore the structural inequalities that keep domestic workers in cycles of poverty, limiting their social and financial mobility despite temporary shifts in power.

Keywords: Domestic workers; Pakistan; Power; Autonomy

Introduction

Domestic servitude is one of the most overlooked yet deeply embedded forms of labour exploitation in Pakistan. Often situated within private households, the work of domestic workers—mostly women—remains undervalued and invisible. Such labour occurs in intimate settings that blur the lines between employment and personal dependency, making it difficult to recognize and critique. This paper investigates how these contradictions are portrayed in Uzma Aslam Khan's debut novel *The Story of Noble Rot* (2001).

Khan through her novel brings to the forefront the life and socio-political reality of the domestic workforce in Pakistani urban society. Set against the backdrop of a deeply stratified society, the novel juxtaposes the narratives of two women: Malika Chaudry, a humble carpenter's wife who works as a domestic servant to make ends meet, and Mrs. Masood, the wealthy wife of a business tycoon. This juxtaposition highlights the stark contrasts in their lived realities, exposing the intersections of class and gender in a society where economic disparity dictates personal freedom and security. The novel does, however, reveal how both women are trapped in different kinds of confinement—Malika by her economic precarity and social invisibility, and Mrs. Masood by her emotional isolation and societal expectations. Both Malika and Mrs. Masood are allotted roughly equal narrative space in terms of presenting their point of view. By thus centring the experiences of domestic workers – often marginalized and rendered invisible, whether in life or in fiction – Khan underlines not only the exploitation of these workers but also their aspirations and resilience while navigating their lived realities. By presenting the layered confinement of both women, the novel provides fertile ground for critical inquiry into the nature of domestic servitude and its embedded social meanings.

Building on this narrative foundation, the paper analyses *The Story of Noble Rot* to answer the following questions:

- How is domestic servitude portrayed as a reflection of broader socio-economic hierarchies in Pakistan through *The Story of Noble Rot* by Uzma Aslam Khan?
- To what extent does wealth contribute to a woman's personal autonomy as portrayed in the selected text?
- How does the intersection of class and gender impact the societal roles of women?

In so doing, the paper seeks to highlight the complexities of oppression in domestic spaces and contribute to the growing discourse on intersectional feminism in South Asian literature.

Literature Review

According to D'Souza in her work *Moving towards Decent Work for Domestic Workers: An Overview of the ILO's Work* (2010), a meeting held in 1951 of ILO experts resulted in the definition of a domestic worker as "[a] wage-earner working in a [private] household, under whatever method and period of remuneration, who may be employed by one or by several employers who receive no pecuniary gain from this work" (9). These domestic workers are given tasks of a domiciliary nature, focused on cooking, cleaning, childcare and other household tasks under the management of the householder as employer. The need for domestic workers arises from the common perception, in Pakistan as well as in other countries, of household work as the domain entirely of the women of the household.

Dutch feminist Johanna Kool-Smit, when discussing this traditional viewpoint regarding household work, stated that the aforementioned work was not only undervalued by society but also not particularly meaningful in the lives of women. She argued that domestic work was merely a necessary evil, and such tasks should be distributed more equally between the men and women of the household in order to ensure that the latter had more time on their hands to engage themselves in more fulfilling work (167). Smit's argument aligns with broader feminist discourse that critiques the unpaid and often invisible nature of domestic work, which places an undue burden on women while limiting their opportunities for personal and professional growth. The dissatisfaction many women feel with their unrewarding role as housewives has led to the delegation of household work to domestic workers, an outcome that

does not correct the undervaluation of such work, merely allocating it to others – primarily women – who are forced by necessity to leave their own homes and earn a living in the homes of the more financially secure (Kraamwinkel 355-356). The undervaluation of household labour extends beyond individual households: it influences societal structures in a way that leads to failing to recognize domestic work as legitimate labour deserving of compensation and legal protections.

In Pakistan, paid domestic labour lacks a legal and political framework to protect workers. As a result, domestic workers, the majority of whom are women as explained above by Kraamwinkel, face a heightened risk of exploitation. Although existing labour laws do establish minimum wage standards, domestic workers are excluded from the legal definition of employed workers. This leaves them without formal protection, and the absence of standardized working conditions serves merely to intensify their vulnerability. Because the hiring of domestic workers is typically based on verbal agreements rather than written contracts, the likelihood of exploitation by their employers substantially increases. These employers may impose excessive working hours, additional labour beyond the initial agreement, and delayed or withheld wages. Domestic workers also often endure mistreatment, including verbal and physical abuse, at the hands of employers or even their families. The undervaluation of their labour, combined with systemic neglect, reinforces their precarious position within Pakistan's socio-economic structure (Zulfiqar 159).

Shafeeq et al. (2022) conducted a study consisting of in-depth interviews with female domestic workers in Sargodha, Pakistan in order to extract the primary challenges faced by these workers. A majority of the interviewees expressed that their work environment was severely unfavourable, particularly to their emotional well-being, as their employers were often insulting and dismissive of their work (177). The socio-demographic profile of the interviewees

indicated the principal reason for their 'choosing' domestic work in order to make ends meet: none were literate, not having gone through the formal education system, and therefore did not possess any marketable skills – except for those acquired through household responsibilities from an early age, like cleaning and caregiving – to provide them with viable employment alternatives to domestic servitude. Many of the interviewees expressed a deep sense of helplessness regarding their circumstances, as illustrated by one respondent, Zulekha, who lamented that witnessing other children live comfortable lives made her feel sorrowful for her own children. However, she saw no alternative path for herself, as her lack of literacy and marketable skills left domestic work as her only option (178). Despite enduring exploitative conditions in the hopes of improving their families' lives, many domestic workers find that their sacrifices do not yield the expected or hoped-for results. The study revealed that their wages remain considerably low, with no way to advocate for better pay or conditions. According to the data collected, only a small percentage of respondents were able to meet even half of their household needs through their earnings (179). Consequently, domestic workers remain trapped in a cycle of economic hardship, where their labour is undervalued, and their aspirations for a better future remain largely unattainable.

The depiction and representation in literature of this domestic workforce highlights the stark power imbalances that define the lives of domestic workers. Ambreen Hai's *Postcolonial Servitude: Domestic Servants in Global South Asian English Literature* (2024) is a collection of essays which, by focusing on texts by South Asian authors such as Daniyal Mueenuddin, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai and others, examine how domestic workers – often women and children – are unprotected by labour laws and subject to exploitation and dehumanization while providing essential services within employers' homes. Hai argues that while South Asian literature has traditionally featured servants as marginal or instrumental, a new generation of writers has begun to make servants and servitude central to their narratives. *The Story of Noble*

Rot contributes to the discourse on postcolonial servitude by offering a narrative that not only portrays the struggles of domestic workers but also critiques the assumptions that wealth or education automatically empower women, making it a key text in the exploration of postcolonial identity and inequality in literature.

Discussion

Khan's narrative signifies the relationship between the haves and have-nots represented in the master-domestic servant bond in the novel. Servants and domestic workers as a social class were not commonly characterised in Pakistani and Indian Anglophone fiction until quite recently, although invariably in these two societies there is a particular and ever-present existence of the domestic help, especially maids (Mirza xv). Mirza delineates, "This relative omission is symptomatic of the societal invisibility and powerlessness of the subaltern classes in the Indian subcontinent" with reference to the domestic servants (xv). In the analysis of the master-servant relationship within the Pakistani context, the key determining factor is the opposite socio-economic positioning of the two social classes, i.e. masters and servants, which highlights the gaping abyss of economic disparity that persists in the society.

Khan has very minutely dealt with the nuances of monetary inequality within the male-dominated Pakistani socio-economic milieu in the novel. The richness and variety of the French menu banquet at Masood Paradise is very subtly juxtaposed with the simple *roti subzi* (flat bread and vegetable curry) at Malika's house. While on one hand the Masood family is rolling in money and opulence, life at Malika's house reeks of poverty, exploitation and physical deformity, especially in her son Momin's case. The reality of life is very different for the Masoods and Chaudrys of Pakistani society, where one has too much wealth and the other lives in utter penury. Malika serves in different houses as a maid, while Chaudry works tirelessly all-day long crafting furniture solely with his hands to make both ends meet, and five-year-old

Momin has to drudge for eighteen long hours daily in the stultifying conditions at the carpet weaving factory so that his small wages may be saved for his baby sister's dowry. Khan's text highlights the feelings of scarcity and deprivation that Malika experiences as an underprivileged, disadvantaged lower-class woman working for upper-class families and the resentment she feels as a result of it. Her work takes place at the households of the affluent, where she is able to witness the staggering contrast between her own home and that of her employers. Khan contrasts the mentioning of baby Faika's dowry to the description of the exquisitely elaborate and expensive collection of clothes, shoes and jewellery for Laila's trousseau to bring out the disparity between the elite and the underprivileged classes of the society.

Pakistan's economic environment after its independence in 1947 and the existing economic situation is largely affected by the neo-liberal strategies which are responsible for the deepening gap between rich and poor countries as well as the disparity between the poor and the affluent within the developing countries. In an article titled "Intergenerational Mobility: Evidence from Pakistan Panel Household Survey" Javed and Irfan point out that an intergenerational gap within Pakistani society persists which signifies that the rich remain rich or even become richer whereas the poor are born into poverty from which they are not able to escape throughout their lives (192). Vertical mobility on the socio-economic ladder is one of the most difficult things to accomplish for the down-trodden poor classes of society. Understanding of the class dynamics as outlined above is particularly relevant as the upper-class elite characters like Mrs Masood do not directly earn a living but their socio-economic positioning of being related to Mr Masood the carpet factory owner ensures a rich, affluent and luxurious lifestyle. Mrs Masood, Hinna, who was a poor nomad before her marriage to Mr Masood, gains opulence and riches only after getting married to her husband. Similarly, their

daughter Laila has such an elaborate trousseau not because of her personal achievements but because she belongs to a rich family.

The living spaces that both these social classes i.e., the employers and the domestic servants inhabit also signify the stark difference in their life realities. Malika along with her family lives in a room adjacent to her husband's workshop in a busy crowded area of the city marked with narrow streets. Her dwelling is simple and very basic, in complete contrast to the house of the Masoods, called "The Masood Paradise" and located in the poshest area of Karachi where "residents named their houses" (Khan 9). The house is both grand and huge, showcasing a long driveway, beautifully landscaped lawns, elaborate fountains and topiaries, pretty French windows and decorated with the most expensive and ornate furniture and décor. The other house, Saeed Mansion, where Malika also works, although not as nicely decorated and kept up to date like the Masood Paradise, is still a huge four-storey mansion with big gardens, a pond, stables, an amphitheatre and a long driveway. The difference between Malika's living quarters and the palatial houses like "Saeed Mansion" and "Masood Paradise" is reflective of the difference in the socio-economic reality of the two disparate social classes, the haves and the have-nots existing within Pakistani society. The domestic service employed by the affluent rich experiences this difference on a daily basis, further adding to their frustration, of which Malika is a fine example.

Maryam Mirza, in her book *Intimate Class Acts: Friendship and Desire in Indian and Pakistani Women's Fiction* (2016), discusses variant relationships between two disparate classes of the subcontinent society namely "the Babu elites and domestic servants, a distinct subaltern class" (xxii). The word 'Babu' Mirza explains in the words of Tabish Khair as "a synonym for the upper and privileged, English-educated middle classes, who even when they are profession-based, are particularly rich in cultural and education capital and sufficiently

secure economically" (32). This description very aptly defines the Masoods in the novel. Using domestic servants as a focus, Mirza discusses ten Anglophone Pakistani and Indian novels tracing the "tense and tender ties between characters from divergent socio-economic milieus and with the intimate frontiers of class in a profoundly unequal and patriarchal social setting" (xxiv). The discussion on the relationship between the classes, according to Dickey, derives from their social and economic setting and "has become one of the most potent idioms of identity, rank and political power" (464). Domestic service is a very apt field for studying the role of interaction between different classes on day-to-day basis as such interactions constitute the concentrated and continuous contact with members of variant classes. This type of employment takes place at the employer's house. The relationship between the masters and the servants therefore develops at a close range, creating an intense dynamic of self-other (master-servant) disparity (Dickey 462-463). The spatial setting and the proximity of the two socio-economically disparate classes acts as a microcosm of Pakistani cosmopolitan cities where excess and utter deprivation exist concurrently. The various relationships in domestic service analysed in Mirza's book include heterosexual romantic love and cross-class female friendship, but neither of these typifies the relationship between Mrs Masood and Malika in *The Story of Noble Rot*. Theirs is not a relationship based on friendship or solidarity nor is it based on love as are the relationships that Mirza highlights. The relationship between Mrs Masood and Malika subsists where the conventional roles are inverted and reversed, where the servant assumes power over the master and starts controlling her. Though the outcome of the reversal of the roles does not remain in favour of the servant for long but while it does, the marginalised is in control.

Malika is desperate to find some kind of a job at the Masood house after Mrs Masood gets rid of two servants. Malika goes to see her, unsure of whether she will be able to persuade the arrogant woman to give her a job or not. However, once she reaches the house and walks

onto the patio she sees, "to her utter amazement, the haughty, neatly groomed, omnipotent Mrs Masood squeezing a full, white breast while heaving over the bulge of her dupatta, grunting like an animal" on the gold divan (54). Seeing the ever-composed Mrs Masood masturbating further adds to her confusion of coming there looking for work. But, soon after, Malika's confusion gives way to confidence, and she sees this moment instead as a rare opportunity. Mrs Masood, intoxicated on wine for the first time in her life, does not register Malika's presence initially and when she does finally, and asks her who she is, Malika seeing the ever-self-possessed *begum* dishevelled and unsure of herself and her surroundings feels she is at an advantage and responds: "'I'm Soomla,' she smiled secretly, thinking of the legendary Sindhi princess renowned for her magical powers. 'I was wondering if you needed a maid'" (58). Mrs Masood, when her head starts clearing, realises the fact that she has been caught drinking wine secretly from her husband's liquor cabinet which she is not allowed to do as per her husband's commands. This realisation accompanied by the guilt of disobeying her husband fills her with fear and discomfort which Malika recognises. Mrs Masood's perturbed state and her weakness for wine provides Malika with an opportunity to exert power over her. Malika's strange physical attribute of being able to twist her feet sideways and backwards comes to her aid and, "... had made her path easier! She studied the (her) feet objectively …and concluded that they were diamonds in the rough: coarse from walking and scarred by last night's dream, but so tough that they caused mountains to crumble, roles to invert" (61). The roles of the master-servant are inverted thereby providing Malika with an opportunity to better her life and that of her family.

Seeing Malika's feet twisted backwards, Mrs Masood takes her to be a witch, a *churail* who has been sent to punish her for her sin of disobeying her husband. Mrs Masood came from the Cholistan Desert in Baluchistan where her family were nomads who moved from one part of the desert to the other in search of water. Her nomadic tribal background marked by tales of

witches and *djinns* overpowering people and their lives because of their wrongdoings adds to her confusion, and she shouts out, “Help me! Shut the window! I’ve been found! The churail has me!” (61). Mrs Masood, when she was getting married to Mr Masood in the desert years ago, was advised by her authoritative grandmother to always obey her husband if she wanted to lead a happy, prosperous life. She had followed her grandmother’s advice religiously and obeyed her husband’s every command since her marriage many years ago. It is only now that she has disobeyed him for the first time by drinking wine secretly, and therefore instantly develops a deep sense of guilt. Malika capitalizes on this shock and guilt, thereby enslaving the rich conceited woman in a supernatural web where the roles are reversed and the servant becomes the master. The domestic labourer comes out on top and is pulling the strings. She is here provided with an opportunity to rule over the master in order to rise beyond the clutches of poverty, exploitation and subalternity.

Being perceived as a witch by the rich landlady, Malika sees it as an opportunity of gaining some financial assistance so that she can free her son Momin from the drudgery at the carpet factory, which is negatively impacting his health, and enrol him in school. Soon after assuming the role of the master, Malika commands Mrs Masood to first hire her as a part time maid for a handsome salary, then to pay the money due to her husband Chaudry, the carpenter whom Mrs Masood has been fleecing over the years. She finally orders the woman to drink more wine from the wine cabinet (as Malika feels that an intoxicated Mrs Masood is more useful to her). Mrs Masood, like a dutiful servant, accepts all her commands and fulfils them. Malika feels happy and contented because she is able to free Momin from the carpet factory and to bring him to a doctor. She also takes him to see the city sights and he is able to have leisure time after years of hard work in the damaging environment of the carpet factory. Her fears for her son’s deteriorating health and physically misshapen body turn out to be all true

when she takes Momin to the doctor, who attributes his deformed body and his breathing problems to the inhuman working conditions of the carpet factory.

Child labour being employed in the hand-woven carpet industry in Pakistan is also one of the issues Khan highlights in the narrative. The harmful physical and psychological effects of this have been signified through Momin. The doctor tells Malika how Momin "has suffered mental as well as physical trauma" at his job resulting in crooked fingers, arched spine, breathing problems, coughing fits and restlessness while sleeping" (73). Momin's drudging for such long hours at the factory in unhealthy conditions is reflective of how the lives of children are shaped by the experiences and limitations consequential of the class into which they are born (Lavalette 22). Children of the rich enjoy comfortable and luxurious lifestyles and are equipped with high standards of education whereas children like Momin suffer due to lack of facilities and the poor economic background of their parents. One of the biggest reasons for Malika assuming the role of the witch to overpower Mrs Masood is her sheer concern for her son, whom she wants to give an education and a normal carefree childhood like other children instead of his wasting away weaving carpets. Malika's grabbing the opportunity of mastery over the privileged Mrs Masood does bring the much-wanted reprieve in her family's financial condition as well as saving her son from the factory. There are no labour laws in Pakistan which safeguard the interests of the domestic workforce and even if there are any, they are not practised. The state does not take any responsibility for this socially marginalised class who is left at the mercy of the rich masters to be dealt with in any way they deem fit. The manipulation and exploitation of the domestic workforce at the hands of their employers is one of the bitter realities of the Pakistani society.

With the reversal in roles of subalternity and privilege the body language of the two women also changes. Malika exudes power and authority and becomes confident in her dealing

with Mrs Masood, whereas she on the other hand is reduced to a mere pawn in the hands of her maidservant. The "sprucely attired, heavily made-up wife of the wealthy industrialist" now cowers like a frightened child and her head is shamefully lowered when she comes to see Chaudry to pay him at Malika's bidding (69). But Malika's feeling of triumphing over Mrs Masood soon becomes somewhat haunted by her fear of losing control and power that she has over Mrs Masood as well as her circumstances:

> Her mind blazed with triumph, ambition, but most of all with fear. It was a kind of fear that only haunts those with an advantage: the fear of losing it. Now that Malika had the upper hand, there could be nothing more painful than falling to the bottom again (67)

She does not want to lose this advantageous position of being in power which she, belonging to the community of domestic workers, has not experienced before. It is through this loss, later in the novel, by which these two women, each belonging to two variant social classes and positioning, tend to come together, but even then, their coming together does not echo the cross-class female solidarity that Mirza explores in her book *Intimate Class Acts*.

Mrs Masood, prior to becoming a slave to Malika's demands, felt safe, secure and accomplished in the midst of all the luxury and riches that her marriage and her subsequent obedience to Mr Masood provided her with. The remembrance of her poverty-stricken nomadic life in the desert was left far behind and she had found herself content and satisfied with her lifestyle and the luxuries it provided. Now, however, under Malika's power she once again feels she is in the desert with no control over her life, falling into a pit of nothingness. Mrs Masood experienced poverty, deprivation and helplessness in her initial part of life in the desert of Cholistan. It was her marriage to the wealthy Mr Masood that changed all that and landed her into a life of riches: "Here life was secure and plentiful, unlike her impoverished, nomadic youth in the desert" (11). The change in her socio-economic circumstances also changed her attitude and she became arrogant, haughty and authoritative especially in her dealings with the

haves-not like her servants. Her transformation from a disadvantaged to a powerful wealthy woman did not generate any feelings of compassion or empathy towards the ones belonging to the lowest strata of society. The narrative highlights her arrogance and disgust when she is dealing with Chaudry, whom she simply robs in terms of paying for the furniture he handcrafts for her.

Mrs Masood also has no empathy for her domestic workers or for the other lower-class people she comes across in her daily life. Although she has risen from the same lower-class background to which her domestic help belongs, there is no compassion or camaraderie exhibited by her. On the contrary her dealing with them is insulting, manipulative and authoritative. This is evident in the way she treats Khalil, who is beaten and fired simply for entering the kitchen at the wrong moment. At the time, Mrs. Masood was guiltily holding a bottle of wine, debating whether she could get away with opening and tasting it. When Khalil unexpectedly walked in, her surprise and guilt caused her to lose her grip on the bottle. Instead of taking responsibility for the accident, she blamed Khalil entirely, knowing that her position of power allowed her to do so without consequences. She went so far as to fire his twin brother Jamil as well, solely for the crime of trying to gently take his brother's side (25-26). Without considering how this action of hers would affect their livelihoods, she callously dismissed the twins, leaving them without an immediate source of income and reinforcing the cycle of exploitation and injustice that people in their position routinely endure in Pakistan.

Much later in the novel, when Malika is called by Mr Masood to his factory, she asks a beggar for directions to Masood Carpets. She is then shocked to recognize the beggar: Khalil, in much worse condition than when she met him last, his once-good looks ravaged by the situation he found himself in:

> He wore a greasy kurta, torn at the throat, so she could see the skeleton of his once broad and athletic chest. His eyes, too, despite their glorious shape and colour, had

> grown tinny, vacant. He held a dried melon rind in filthy hands, determined to suck more juice from it. 'That big building at the end of the street,' he answered gruffly, and walked away. (150-151)

Within the course of a single month, his kindness and generosity have vanished; his circumstances have forced him to care only for himself, as Jamil once counselled him to do. Looking at him, Malika feels a sense of guilt for being the reason the two brothers were fired: if she hadn't put herself and her son above others, showing up at the Masood Paradise to get another job, she would not have run into Khalil and asked him for a glass of water, leading to his current condition. Poverty, therefore, leaves little room for compassion, forcing individuals to prioritize survival over concern for others.

Mrs Masood's general attitude towards her servants – the ones that she retains – is one of an owner dissatisfied with the objects she possesses. She evaluates their worth based on their appearance, reinforcing classist and aesthetic biases that dictate their visibility within her household. To maintain her social status, she deems them unfit to be seen by her guests, as their presence, in her view, would undermine the carefully curated image she presents:

> Tonight the Chauclets were coming to dinner. Waiters from the Sheraton Hotel had been hired to serve them. Her own servants, although hard working, were not publicly presentable. They either stammered, or were fat, coal-complexioned and flat-footed, or simply smiled too much. (25)

This attitude appears again in her reaction to Tufail, the cook, whose pockmarked face she finds unappealing. Her discomfort becomes more pronounced when her guest, M. Didier, unexpectedly requests Tufail to come out of the kitchen, forcing her to confront the presence of a worker she seeks to render invisible.

Mrs Masood is not the only character in the novel who treats her servants as inferior beings. Mr Saeed's eldest daughter, Saima, frequently uses Malika as an outlet for her anger or irritation whenever she has a bad day at school or her father ignores her complaints. Even

his middle child, Fazeel, would say, “All right, stupid,” whenever Malika insisted upon him leaving his play and going to bed for the night (21). Although this is a typical response from a young boy when told to do something unappealing, Fazeel even at this young age seems aware that Malika is unable to respond or properly scold him as she does not hold a position of power in his household, even though she is the adult and he the child.

Malika’s lack of power in the Saeed mansion, stemming from her inferior position in society, forces her to make numerous concessions for the Saeed children—often at the expense of her own son, Momin. Soon after freeing Momin from factory labour, she begins bringing him to the Saeed mansion so he can stay close to her while she works. However, the youngest Saeed child, Faisal, starts demanding even more of her attention, forcing Malika to neglect Momin in order to appease him. She recognizes that if Mr. Saeed perceives his children as dissatisfied or disruptive, he may prohibit Momin’s presence in the household, thereby eliminating any opportunity for Malika to spend time with her son (104). This fear forces her into a position of compliance, even when confronted with mistreatment toward Momin - so much so that when Saima directly mistreats Momin, she can do nothing but watch. On one of these occasions, rather than scolding Saima for her misbehaviour, she slaps Momin for approaching Saima when she is in a bad mood, because she cannot risk her scolding of Saima reaching Saima’s father, her employer (116). An alternative reading is that Malika does not even once think of scolding or slapping Saima instead of the victim, Momin, which demonstrates her internalized servitude and the constraints imposed by her vulnerable position. Whether as a deliberate act of self-preservation or an unconscious submission to the dynamics of domestic labour, Malika’s response reflects the power imbalance that defines her existence.

The difference between the actions of the Saeed children and those of Mrs Masood is that Mrs Masood knows what it is like to not have any standing in society and still refuses to

empathize with those who are in a similar situation to the one she once experienced. When Malika gains control over her, Mrs Masood once again becomes the one who is controlled and manipulated. She feels the loss of power, and later this loss of authority coupled with her deep sense of guilt for disobeying her husband severely affects her mind. In one of her fits she cuts off her "rotting, tumescent tongue" which wanted to taste the forbidden (red wine) again and again (70). This somewhat bizarre and inexplicable act of hers is the turning point where Malika too loses the control and power she has over Mrs Masood. Malika's control lasts only a few weeks, during which time she is able to get her husband paid, get Momin out of the carpet factory and gain some extra money to help make a few comfortable changes in her humble dwelling. Her loss of power results in her landing into a situation which she is no longer in control of. The control and power now come into the hands of Mr Masood, who is a symbol of the patriarchal Pakistani society. At first, it seems as if Mr Masood is unaware of the vast chasm between his own lived reality and that of Malika: "Surely your employer will understand?" he asks Malika when, upon being commanded to meet Mr Masood at the carpet factory on Thursday, Malika responds that she works at another house on that day (144). This single question shows how deeply disconnected Mr Masood is from the domestic workforce. In a world where opening a door at the wrong time may get you fired, it would be unthinkable for Malika to take a day off from work unless she wanted to risk losing her livelihood. However, from Mr Masood's later words it becomes apparent just how conscious he is of his superior position. The little reprieve that the underprivileged woman enjoys ends with dire repercussions for her and her family. She is threatened by Mr Masood to either safely hide his mentally disturbed, tongue-less wife in "Saeed Mansion" where she is away from the prying eyes of their guests due to be gathered for Laila's wedding festivities, or her husband Chaudry will be killed. Malika at this point is desperate and "at the bottom again", thrust back into her prior position of being the slave duly controlled and manipulated by the elite master (72).

A consideration of the traditional 'female' roles and the plight of women in Pakistani society are integral to the representation of cross-class female relationships (Mirza xxvii). Mrs Masood and Malika are two women caught up in the socio-economic and cultural dilemmas. Mrs Masood on her marriage was warned by her grandmother to always please her husband which she has been trying to do ever since. Her relationship with her husband lacks affection and respect from the husband's side but she does not seem to mind it very much because of the affluence she lives in as a result of her marriage. She herself reflects on their relationship where "her shaggy spouse was a cuddly sheepdog, herding her his lamb, so she could yield and gain his sanction" (12). Mrs Masood throughout her married life remains an obedient wife who is ready to do whatever her husband demands of her. She also depends greatly on his approval of her choices, whether it is her clothing or the menu for dinners or buying of furniture. Mr Masood, on the other hand, does not seem interested in her or whatever she does. Mrs Masood makes obeying her husband and vying for his approval the sole purpose of her life and when she drinks wine, she eradicates this sole purpose, thereby experiencing extreme guilt in the aftermath. The male-dominated Pakistani society traditionally binds the wife in the role of an obedient servant to her husband. The master-servant bond between Mrs Masood and Malika that *The Story of Noble Rot* highlights is also echoed in the mismatched unequal relationship of Mr and Mrs Masood. There is no emotional attachment or camaraderie between the couple. Moreover, their relationship is marked by Mr Masood's absolute authority and Mrs Masood's total submission. Her being a woman marks her inferiority and complete obedience to the man, Mr Masood, without any question or doubt, no matter how wealthy or rich she has become. Riches do not always guarantee equality and freedom in the case of a Pakistani woman who is ever restricted and limited within her social and cultural roles of subordination. This shows through Mrs. Masood's expression when, overseeing the gardeners change the garden's style

for her daughter's wedding, she "stared longingly out of the French windows at her torn paradise, more like a prisoner than a wife with clout" (65).

Malika, on the other hand, shares a more equal and balanced relationship with her husband where there is mutual love and respect. Nevertheless, she is helpless in the face of Chaudry's decisions related to their son and his earnings. Although she is the one who earns more than her husband and is responsible for running the house economically, her being the wife restricts her, forbidding her from being the decision maker. Even when she makes Momin leave his work in the carpet factory, she does not tell her husband because of the fear that he might not approve of it. Her hiding the reality of Momin no longer working at the factory and the way she deceives her husband about Mrs Masood is reflective of how the decisions of the household are mostly taken by the men in a patriarchal society.

Malika's self-addressed question, "How will I find time to work in three households?" (53) highlights the burden placed on women who must juggle both paid and unpaid labour. At the time she asks this question, she is only employed at one house – the Saeed Mansion – and considering applying for employment at the Masood Paradise. This third household, then, is her own home, where she works without pay solely on account of her being the woman of the house and therefore in charge of all domestic tasks. While she earns more than her husband and financially sustains the family, she is still expected to manage domestic responsibilities without complaint. This expectation reflects the broader reality of many women in patriarchal societies, where marriage often becomes a form of domestic servitude rather than a truly equal partnership.

Conclusion

The Story of Noble Rot presents a unique perception on gender and class dynamics in Pakistani society, exposing the rigid structures that define and confine women's roles. Through the contrasting lives of Mrs. Masood and Malika, the novel highlights how wealth does not necessarily grant autonomy, nor does financial contribution guarantee authority within the household. Mrs. Masood, despite her affluence, remains subordinate to her husband; Malika, a significant earner in her family, is still expected to prioritize her husband's wishes over her own personal desires for both herself and her son. The relationships Mrs. Masood and Malika have, both with the men in their lives and with each other, emphasize the pervasive inequality that continues to shape women's experiences. The novel through its characters and their lived realities compels readers into reflecting more deeply on the systemic barriers that prevent true equality for women across class lines.

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