

Feminist Perspectives in the Poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai: A Narrative Literature Review

Shazia Shah¹, Sarala Thulasi Palpanadan^{2*}, Ishfaque Ahmed Abbasi³

1 Department of English,

Benazir Bhutto Shaheed University Karachi 75660, Sindh, PAKISTAN

2 Centre for Language Studies,

Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Parit Raja 86400, Johor, MALAYSIA

3 Sukkur IBA University,

Sukkur 65200, Sindh, PAKISTAN

*Corresponding Author: sarala@uthm.edu.my

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Abstract

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, one of the most revered Sufi poets of Sindh, presents a unique and progressive portrayal of women in his poetry. His exhibits highlight female autonomy, challenge patriarchal norms and emphasize female empowerment, agency, strength and self-determination. This literature review explores the feminist concepts embedded in Bhitai's poetry, particularly through his depiction of legendary heroines such as Marvi, Sassui and Suhni, who embody strength, devotion and boldness against oppression. Using a narrative review approach, this research examines various research studies available in separate research databases that how Bhitai's poetry aligns with feminist principles, advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment within the cultural and mystical framework within Sindhi literature. The study discusses the research conducted on feminist vision of Bhitai. This study highlights the relevance of Bhitai's poetry in shaping progressive narratives about women empowerment, Gender Equality and finding the research gap in connection with modern feminism therefore, this study will open the new doors of research on feminist concepts of Bhitai exist in his poetry.

1. Introduction

Feminism is a movement advocating for women's social, economic and political equality. The term originates from the Latin word *Femina*, meaning "woman", and was first linked with the struggle for women's rights and equal status in society (Raina, 2017; Aina-Pelemo et al, 2021). While interpretations of feminism may differ, at its core, it challenges societal and economic restrictions imposed on women (Dean & Aune, 2015). The feminist movement initially emerged in the West before gaining global recognition. One of the earliest feminist philosophers, Christine de Pizan (Nowacka, 2002), challenged dominant views on women in the late 14th and early 15th centuries by advocating for female literacy (McKenna, 2019). In the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft's book "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" became a foundational text in feminist philosophy, emphasizing women's education and autonomy (Khatoun, 2024). Feminism, in its essence, promotes equal rights, opportunities and fair treatment for all genders (Eisenstein, 2024). The movement has long sought political, economic and cultural equality, shaping societies across centuries (Berik & Kongar, 2021).

Modern feminism has expanded significantly in scope, encompassing a diverse range of ideas and initiatives that aim to promote equality and recognition for women and other marginalized groups (Dell, 2022). Building on the foundation of second-wave feminism, contemporary feminist discourse addresses critical issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination and gender-based violence, among other social justice concerns. The evolution of mainstream feminism has led to increased inclusivity, now advocating for the rights of women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities (Siegel & Calogero, 2021). A defining feature of modern feminism is that it is centered around issues of gender equity and the dismantling of male-dominated power structures. This entails advocating systemic changes to laws, institutions and societal norms in order to create a better environment for everyone. Some of the main goals of today's feminism are to eliminate the gender pay gap, achieve gender justice and prevent sexual harassment and violence. The movement also embraces an intersectional perspective, which considers how race, gender and sexuality affect the lives and chances of individuals in society. In striving to meet these multifaceted issues, feminism remains a force for change to create a more equitable society.

One of the greatest mystic or Sufi poets of the region is Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, who was born in Hala Haveli in 1689 and died in 1752 AD. His work, especially his most renowned work, *Shah Jo Risalo* (The Poetry Collection of Shah), is celebrated for exploring themes of love and mysticism and for advocating social justice (Katohar et al., 2024). Bhitai also expresses concerns about oppression, inequality, and marginalization and calls for establishing a society based on the principle of justice and harmony (Khosro et al., 2023). Another important feature of his work is his positive portrayal of strong and independent women. He also highlights themes of resilience, courage and defiance against societal norms through the legendary heroines of Sindhi folklore such as Marui, Sassui, Suhni, Noori, Sorath, Lilan and Moomal (Hussain, 2021). These characters also challenge traditional gender roles and embody qualities that are consistent with modern feminist ideals (Jatoi et al., 2019).

Bhitai's depiction of these women goes beyond mere storytelling; it serves as a source of empowerment. Marui, for instance, symbolizes unwavering loyalty to one's homeland, resisting external control, while Sassui and Suhni represent the strength to pursue love and spiritual fulfillment against all odds (Munawar et al., 2020). His poetry not only acknowledges the struggles faced by women but also affirms their agency and ability to shape their destinies (Farwa, 2020). This progressive outlook resonates with contemporary feminist movements, emphasizing gender equality, empowerment and recognition of women's contributions to society. Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry reflects core feminist ideals such as gender equality, intersectionality and challenging patriarchal norms, as discussed by Adhikari and Saha (2022). His heroines Sassui, Marui, Suhni and others embody early expressions of feminism, showcasing strength, resilience and autonomy through acts of courage and defiance. Rather than portraying femininity as passive or purely reverential, Bhitai presents complex female characters who challenge mainstream cultural narratives (Isnaini, 2022). For instance, in *Shah Jo Risalo*, Sassui's relentless journey across the desert in search of her beloved Punhu highlights her determination and empowerment, aligning with post-feminist ideals of women actively shaping their own destinies (Khan & Khan, 2022). Similarly, Marui's story adds another dimension to Bhitai's feminist vision. Despite being kidnapped by King Umar and offered a life of luxury, Marui refuses to abandon her cultural identity and moral integrity, emphasizing the importance of personal and cultural autonomy over imposed societal expectations (Shroff, 2022). Her unwavering resistance against materialistic temptations and oppressive forces reinforces a modern feminist perspective, celebrating women's independence and strength (Malik & Rasool, 2021).

Bhitai has also described these women, and his depiction of these women goes beyond the level of storytelling; it is an empowering source. Marui is the incarnation of loyalty to the land, the resistance to external subjugation, while Sassui and Suhni are the embodiment of the courage to sacrifice everything for love and spirituality (Munawar et al., 2020). His poetry does not only reveal the problems which befall women but also proclaims the role of women in the determination of their fate (Farwa, 2020). This forward-thinking is in sync with the current feminist movements that are calling for equality, empowerment and recognition of women's role in society. The poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai embodies the main feminist principles of equality, intersectionality and the opposition to patriarchal stereotypes, following the work of Adhikari and Saha (2022). The early manifestations of feminism can be found in the heroines of Sassui, Marui, Suhni and others, who display courage, perseverance and self-reliance. Bhitai through his poetry does not depict feminine and reverential types of women but presents strong and courageous women who oppose conventional cultural perceptions (Isnaini, 2022). For example, in *Shah Jo Risalo*, Sassui, a passionate woman who travels through the desert to be with her lover Punhu, is a post-feminist character who, like many women today, controls her life (Khan & Khan, 2022). In the same manner, the tale of Marui enriches Bhitai's feminist vision in another way. Although King Umar has taken Marui as his captive and can give her a luxurious life, Marui refused to sacrifice her cultural and moral values, which stressed the choice of individual and cultural freedom instead of society's dictates (Shroff, 2022). Her steadfastness to materialistic and spiritual pressures and her fight for women's liberty and strength is a contemporary feminist stance that Malik and Rasool (2021) have described in their research study.

Today, in a world where gender-based discrimination and violence are still present, Bhitai's heroines are living and are the perfect examples of heroines. His poetry conveys the message that women are not the shadows of fate but the main actors of their destiny (Farwa, 2020). This message is especially significant in societies where the struggle for women's rights is still ongoing, matching the global fight against outdated prejudices and barriers and for the equality of all people. The legacy of Bhitai is not limited to Sindh, and he is still relevant even today as a messenger of equality, strength and social justice. His legacy inspires movements for women's empowerment all over the world.

The research on Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry is also found to contain feminist themes, but this area has not been fully explored in terms of how his women characters are agents, resourceful and independent. This gap offers a chance to consider the problems of the key female characters of Bhitai and to look at their stories as the initial manifestations of the feminist movement and the concept of personal choice. This study is a narrative literature review which aims to contribute to the critical analysis of the feminist approaches reflected in Bhitai's poetry. The problem statement identifies problems with the current research and reviews, especially regarding the depiction of women's empowerment, liberation, and strength. The gap analysis also points to the need to explore Bhitai's heroines further and to compare Bhitai's literary portrayals of gender with those of today. Besides, a more detailed textual analysis of Bhitai's poetry may help to reveal how his female characters represent feminist values in the context of Sindhi society and where previous scholarship is limited. In this way, the present research can be connected to the general discussion of gender equality, social justice and women's rights through the integration of Bhitai's poetic vision and contemporary feminist theory.

2. Literature Review

Literature is the mirror of a society, and it reflects its values, traditions and beliefs. When viewing it from a feminist perspective, we learn about gender roles and power structures and continue to fight for women's rights to this day (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Feminism is a movement that opposes male dominance and advocates for equality, and it has affected both the way literature is analyzed and written (Allagbe & Amoussou, 2020). This research study looks at the concepts of feminism in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai to see the current research on feminism in Bhitai's poetry, what gaps exist, and what areas need further exploration. This review reveals how his poetry challenges conventional societal perceptions of women by analyzing his work through a feminist lens and how it resonates with today's gender equality debate.

2.1 Feminism in English Literature

Feminism in English literature covers a large number of works, and the works discussed in this chapter contribute to the ongoing debate on gender and identity. For centuries, literature has been a tool for expressing women's rights, representation and liberation (Karimullah, 2020), from the earliest works of Mary Wollstonecraft (Todd, 2014) up to the present-day Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Karthiga et al., 2022). Renowned feminist thinkers like Wollstonecraft, Woolf (Nicolson, 2021), de Beauvoir (Braz, 2022) and Elaine Showalter (Showalter, 2012) played an important role in unsettling the societal norms that perpetuated gender inequalities (Vardhan, 2018). For instance, Wollstonecraft refused the idea of the natural gender roles, arguing that they were socially constructed, whereas Beauvoir stressed the importance of perceiving women as individuals with their own potential and not as stereotyped feminine beings (Vardhan, 2018). Current studies on feminism in English literature (Desmawati, 2020) explore different feminist perspectives and analyze various literary works, such as *Little Women*, through the lens of Liberal, Marxist, Existentialist, and Radical feminism. These perspectives revolve around the themes of autonomy, economic independence and the resistance against patriarchal oppression and violence. A similar important study (Irshad & Yasmin, 2022) investigates the relationship between feminist theory and literary translation. Feminist literary criticism was reinforced in the 1970s as a reaction to the prevalence of male perspectives in literary studies (Sharma, 2023). This approach takes issue with how women have been depicted in literature for years, with a focus on their marginalization and the extension of stereotypes. Such important predecessors of the feminist movement as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf were the first to notice that literature, especially that written by men, reflects patriarchal values, which assign women certain subordinate positions and perpetuate gender differences (Simons, 2019; Stamp, 2011). Another important concept is Elaine Showalter's idea of 'gynocriticism', which she introduced in 1993 (Showalter, 1993). This framework focuses on the literature by women, how women authors create their own stories and how they differ from conventional storytelling. It focuses on how women writers use literature to relate their own lived experiences and resist society's gendered expectations (Showalter, 1993; Rani, 2013). When we read texts through this lens, feminist critics reveal the capacity of literature to perpetuate or disturb gender structures. These insights and perspectives are well established to develop feminist translation studies further and thus extend the discussion on gender in literature.

2.2 Feminism-Based Poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai can be called a visionary poet who has depicted women in a very thoughtful and understanding way. His poetry reflects the gender roles, the position of women, their fight, and their role in society during his time, which was mostly patriarchal (Malik & Rasool, 2021). In his verses, Bhitai presents various women's roles and shares their feelings, experiences and the way they see themselves (Темирбаева et al, 2021). Bhitai, unlike other writers, does not depict women in his literature as objects of desire but as strong and proud individuals (Khuram et al, 2023). His poetic narratives are also a testimony to the fact that women are wise, strong and beautiful and that there is equality between the two partners in the spiritual as well as the worldly journey (Aftab, 2022). He also challenges the gender norms of his society by identifying and questioning the stereotypes existing in his time.

In a society where the role of women is subdued and dominated by men, the portrayal of women by Bhitai is very commendable as he has shown respect and empathy towards them. He depicts them as self-dependent and spirited women who fight against the norms and are central to the action of the story. Bughio (2022) also pointed out that women in the literature of Sufism are often depicted as courageous and independent characters who contribute to shaping the story. One of his most famous poetry, *Sur Marui* (Chapter Marui), is the story of Marui, a girl from the village who refuses the advances of a king and prefers to cling to her country and her fiancé. It is her steadfastness to her ideals that makes her a perfect example of a righteous and patriotic woman (Khosro et al., 2021). In the same manner, in *Sur Suhni* (Chapter Suhni), Bhitai relates the love tragedy of Suhni, who, inspired by her love, risked her life to swim across a dangerous river to meet her beloved Mehar (Jatoi et al., 2019). Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai presented the Suhni as a courageous woman who, for the sake of her love, is willing to sacrifice everything, including her life, which is not only about love but also a manifestation of a woman's free will. Bhitai in *Sur Sorath* (Chapter Sorath) featured Sorath, a woman who did not conform to cultural regulations to pursue her love interest, Rai Diyach (Huang, 2022). In these stories, Bhitai did not present women as helpless or obedient at all; rather, he given them a voice and said how they want to live their lives. Suhni and Sorath are courageous women who, in the face of societal pressure, choose to follow their hearts and live their lives on their own terms (Jatoi et al., 2019).

Scholars have pointed out that Bhitai's poetry centralizes women and that they are depicted as strong, wise and morally courageous individuals (Tayyub, 2018). According to Jatoi, Bhitai's modern and progressive thinking about women makes him one of the first feminist poets in Sindhi literature (Jatoi et al., 2019). His poetry is still topical and features in debates on gender, power and women's rights (Shaikh et al, 2015). Although he does not always conform to the principles of feminism in the modern world, his depiction of females like Sassui, Suhni and Marui reveals a profound insight into the role and freedom of women (Ahmed Bashir & Humera Naz, 2017). The roles played by Sassui, Suhni and Marui show strong women in adverse conditions, which is in sync with the current society's discourse on women's empowerment.

Bhitai's poetry is not only an artistic piece but also a bold comment on gender roles and women's liberty (Hussain, 2021). His portrayal of female characters as self-reliant, prudent and brave goes against the norms of his society. Huang (2021) points out that Bhitai's work is a revision of the role of women in spiritual and societal life and for the equal access and recognition of women. His verses are a timeless tribute to women's tenacity, personal freedom, and the principles of gender equality and power respect (Ahmed Bashir & Humera Naz, 2017). Bhitai's poetic narratives are still actual and serve as a bridge between the past and the present discussions of women's rights. They demonstrate that his message is still actual and meaningful in the contemporary feminist discourse.

Although many studies have been made on Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's feminist themes, some of them are still quite limited. Another area that needs further study is how his depiction of women is related to his other views on social justice and equality. Although scholars have noticed his criticism of the patriarchal norms, there is a need to know how these ideas match with his socio-political commentary in general. Also, there is a need to know how Bhitai's poetry affects modern feminist movements and current debates on gender equality. These links could assist in bridging historical views with current debates, thus providing a more comprehensive view of Bhitai's literary and social influence if these connections are explored.

2.3 Research Gap Analysis

This study's research gap analysis is a plan of action for collecting, coding and analyzing research in order to meet the purpose of the study. The research on Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry in connection with feminism conducted between 2017 and 2024, is mainly historical and literary in approach, with little investigation into how it connects to current feminist movements, intersectional gender discourse and its real-life impact on women's empowerment in Sindh.

2.3.1 Women in the Folk Literature of Sindh: Re-Examining the Poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (Ahmed Bashir & Humera Naz, 2017)

The research study provides historical insight into the social and cultural conditions of 18th-century Sindh as being a male-dominated structure. It highlights how Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai portrayed women as symbols of patriotism, spirituality and courage in his poetry, challenging conventional gender norms. The study acknowledges the role of women in uplifting oppressed and marginalized communities, demonstrating their active participation in societal transformation. However, the study does not delve into their actual lived experiences in 18th-century Sindh. The research focuses on historical perspectives but does not draw connections to contemporary Sindhi society. The study does not discuss how Shah Latif's feminist themes resonate with modern-day Sindhi women. Shah Latif's poetry is deeply embedded in Sindh's oral tradition and musical performances, yet the study does not explore how these cultural practices impact the perception of women's roles.

2.3.2 The Role of Women in Sufism: Highlighting the Importance Of Women Sufis In Sindh (Karachi and Thatta) (Manzoor & Shah, 2018)

The research challenges traditional gender hierarchies by emphasizing that women hold equal importance in Sufism and can be as ascetic as men. It highlights the role of Sufi women in promoting gender equality and social awareness through their teachings and practices. However, the study does not provide detailed historical accounts of specific female Sufis in Karachi and Thatta. The research discusses women's roles in Sufism but does not explore the challenges they faced within the patriarchal structure of Sindhi society. While the study acknowledges that Sufi women contributed to gender equality, it does not analyze how their teachings continue to influence present-day Sindhi society. Therefore, this study does not describe the role of Sufi women in empowering females in society.

2.3.3 Feminist Voice in The Eighteenth Century Sindh: Glimpses from The Poetry of Bhitai (Jatoi et al., 2019)

The study highlights Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's challenge to patriarchal norms, portraying women as courageous, spiritual, and loyal figures. It links Bhitai's poetry to socio-economic transformations in 18th-century Sindh, including the decline of Mughal authority and the rise of the Kalhora dynasty, which led to increased social stratification. By analyzing characters like Sasui, Suhni, Marui and Nuri, the study explores Bhitai's feminist themes, particularly women's struggles, caste issues, and the importance of personal virtues over birth status. However, the study does not situate his work within broader feminist theoretical frameworks. The study examines how Bhitai wrote about women but does not explore how women themselves have historically engaged with his poetry. Bhitai's poetry is primarily preserved and transmitted through oral traditions and music, yet the study does not explore how these performances influence the perception of his feminist themes. While the study examines the content of Bhitai's poetry, it does not deeply analyze his use of metaphors, symbolism and poetic structures. The study lacks a comparative analysis of Bhitai's feminist themes and modern feminist discourse.

2.3.4 Gender and Sufism: A reflection of women's empowerment in Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's Poetry (Munawar et al, 2020)

The study admits that women in Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's era were treated differently and were made to enjoy not equal rights with men. It also reveals how Bhitai's poetry helped improve the position of women in Sindhi society and depicted women as courageous and proud. However, the study does not explain the precise social, political and economic reasons for their suppression. A more detailed historical review would better understand women's real lives in 18th-century Sindh. The study is based on Bhitai's poetry but does not include a comparison with other Sufi poets or feminist voices in South Asian literature. The research discusses Bhitai's themes of empowerment but does not examine how his literary techniques, such as symbolism, metaphor and poetic structure, convey these ideas. A deeper literary analysis would strengthen the study's findings.

2.3.5 Ways of Love: Self-making and Repertoire Formation through the Musical Legacy of Shah Abdul Latif in Sindh (Huang, 2021)

The research highlights how Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai redefined traditional gender roles by portraying women as heroines, like the way princes are glorified as heroines in Western fairy tales. It describes that 12 out of 31 Surs (Chapters) sung by Faqeers (Dedicated Singers of the poetry of Bhitai) are named after and feature female protagonists, emphasizing their central role in Sindh's musical and literary heritage. The study underscores the agency of women in decision-making regarding marriage, challenging oppressive customs like Karo-Kari (honor killings). However, the study draws parallels between Shah Abdul Latif's heroines and Western fairy tale princes;

it lacks a broader comparison with other South Asian or Sufi traditions that also empower female protagonists. A cross-cultural analysis could further deepen the understanding of gender representations in literature and music. The study focuses on Shah Latif's portrayal of women but does not explore how contemporary Sindhi society perceives these narratives. The research highlights women's agencies in marriage but does not thoroughly examine the socio-political forces that continue to restrict women's rights in Sindh. While the study acknowledges the role of Faqeers in preserving Shah Latif's work, it does not explore how musical interpretations influence the transmission of these gendered narratives. A deeper ethnographic study of performance styles and audience reception could add richness to the findings.

2.3.6 The Mystical Philosophy of Shah Abdul Latif: A Study of Shah Jo Risalo (Lajwani & Mirjat, 2021)

The research acknowledges that Earnest Trump played a crucial role in bringing Shah Jo Risalo to global attention, making Bhitai's work accessible to a wider audience. It explores the mystical and spiritual themes in Shah Jo Risalo, highlighting how its sequential melodies promote values of humanity and tolerance. The study emphasizes how Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai conveyed his mystical philosophy through the struggles and commitment of his heroines, reinforcing the spiritual significance of female characters in his poetry. However, the study does not compare it with other Sufi poets and thinkers. The research acknowledges the role of sequential melodies but does not analyze how Bhitai's poetry was performed, transmitted and interpreted through music. The study discusses Bhitai's promotion of humanity and tolerance, but it does not examine the feminism concepts of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai in connection with Sufism.

2.3.7 The Imagery of Eyes and the Concept of Male Gaze in Shah Latif's Poetry (Khan & Khan, 2022)

The research explores imagery, symbolism and metaphors in Shah Jo Risalo, focusing on the use of eye symbolism in Bhitai's poetry. It argues that Shah Latif addressed the concept of the male gaze centuries before Western theorists, such as Laura Mulvey (1975), introduced it in feminist discourse. It differentiates Bhitai's use of sight symbolism from that of poets like Shakespeare, Shelley, Milton, and Pablo Neruda, emphasizing that Shah's beloved is the Divine Creator rather than a worldly lover. It highlights Sur Aasa (Chapter Aasa) as an example of eye symbolism and the oneness of God, linking visual imagery to spiritual themes in Bhitai's poetry. However, the study does not critically examine how his portrayal of gender aligns with or differs from feminist interpretations of the male gaze. The research does not contextualize how Sindhi society in the 18th century viewed gender, sight and divine love. The research does not examine how contemporary Sindhi scholars, feminists or Sufi practitioners interpret Bhitai's use of the male gaze and eye symbolism today.

2.3.8 Feudalism and Class Differences in Sindh: A Study of Shah Abdul Latif's Perspective (Khosro et al, 2023)

The research applies a Marxist perspective to analyze feudal structures in Sindh through Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's Sur Kaamode. It traces Marx's concept of class struggle, identifying bourgeoisie and proletariat dynamics within the historical feudal system of Sindh. The study highlights the oppression of women under feudalism, using the character of Noori, who marries a feudal lord out of fear. The study discusses feudalism in 18th-century in Sindh but does not explore how Bhitai's critique of feudalism remains relevant in contemporary Sindhi society. The study interprets Noori's story through a Marxist lens, but it does not deeply analyze the literary devices, symbolism and poetic techniques Bhitai employs to critique feudal structures. While the study acknowledges women's oppression under feudalism, it does not integrate feminist or intersectional perspectives to analyze Noori's position.

While extensive research exists on women in Sindhi literature and feminism in Pakistan, there are significant gaps in linking these historical perspectives with modern gender issues. Future studies should focus on contemporary feminist readings of Bhitai's poetry, intersectional analysis of Pakistani feminism and empirical assessments of how Bhitai's concepts of Sufism and feminism continue to shape gender roles today.

3. Methodology

This article aims to explore and analyze existing research on the representation of female empowerment and feminist themes in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, particularly in the context of modern feminist discourse. To achieve this, journal articles and scholarly works published between 2017 and 2024 were retrieved from digital databases such as Science Direct, Research Gate and Google Scholar. The research focused on keywords such as feminism, women's resistance and gender equality in Bhitai's poetry. The study examines how Bhitai's poetic narratives contribute to contemporary feminist thought, particularly in redefining traditional gender roles,

emphasizing women's agency and highlighting their voices in South Asian literary heritage. Through a narrative review of the most recent scholarly interpretations, this study has tried to bridge Bhitai's poetry with modern feminist ideologies and attempts to show that Bhitai's work is still relevant in conveying the message of a woman's strength, autonomy and resilience in the modern world.

4. Results and Discussion

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry is quite progressive in its view of gender roles and women's liberty, making him one of the earliest champions of gender equality in the Sindhi literary world (Hussain, 2021). His poetic narratives intensely portray female characters like Sassui, Marui and Suhni as strong, wise and independent women who defy gender stereotypes. Huang (2021) points out that Bhitai's works do not present women as submissive beings but as courageous and self-reliant individuals. Through the appreciation of their bravery and will, Bhitai clearly targets a patriarchal system, and its criticism is relevant even today, focusing on the issue of the equality of women and their individuality, as well as their involvement in the spiritual and public life (Ahmed Bashir & Humera Naz, 2017). His depiction of women as strong and independent persons thus makes him a poet of his time as well as the current, championing the cause of women and their dignity.

4.1 Spiritual Devotion

In Bhitai's poetry, women's devotion is usually shown as a sign of a pure soul and a way of connecting with the divine. Hussain (2022) discusses how Bhitai often employs female characters to represent steadfastness, restraint and strong belief, thus making them the embodiments of spiritual devotion. Syed (1996) agrees with this argument and adds that women in Bhitai's verses are presented as religious mentors and leaders, with a special emphasis on their religious zeal. This role is also seen in Suhni, Sassui and Marui, who are examples of this, as Bhitai understood that women's spiritual power was integral to their personality (Boivin & Boivin, 2020).

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai depicted women as embodiment of spiritual devotion and thus challenged the conventional patriarchy. All his heroines are searching for divine truth, and they prove their mettle and faith in their spiritual and emotional growth. Punhu is sought by Sassui persistently, and this reflects the path of Sufism, which demands steadfastness and purity of the devotee. Marui's refusal of King Umar's indulgences is a rejection of the material world, which is also the Sufi way of life. Thus, Bhitai's women, as spiritual masters, subvert the conventional religious narrative controlled by men and thereby convey that enlightenment is indeed genderless. In addition, the love of Suhni for Mehar illustrates the soul's desire for the divine; thus, the love is shown as a form of spiritual rebellion. The works of Bhitai are still significant in the feminist and spiritual debates, and they defend the right of women to participate in the construction of moral and religious norms. In his work, he celebrates the strength of the feminine in the search for truth, and his work continues to be relevant to this day and to every generation.

4.2 Resilience and Endurance

Bhitai's poetry celebrates the strength and determination of women as women who are firm in their values, beliefs and commitments towards their family and society, even in the face of extreme adversities (Munawar et al., 2020). Adversity is also a predominant theme in his stories, which show how women are resilient in the face of adversity. The stories of Sassui, Suhni and Marui are examples of this kind of courage and dedication. Bhitai, through his work, not only celebrates these qualities but also pays tribute to women's role in society and their endurance and contributions.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry is a subtle portrayal of women, approving their firmness, moral character and their determination to uphold their principles. Through the emphasis on their capability to suffer and cling to their principles, Bhitai described the existing discourses that present women in a passive role. Rather, he made them appear as the embodiment of strength and steadfastness and, thus, as the bearers of the role in the formation of family and society. The love story of Suhni and Sassui is not just a love story but a story of the courage of two people who endured betrayal and social pressure. The love and commitment of both parties show the struggle of women in general and their capability to stand by their beliefs and principles despite the pressure from society. Through their experience, Bhitai also reveals women as having emotional and psychological toughness, which means that real toughness is shown when a person responds to adversity with courage and control. Furthermore, the interpretation of women as the bearers of moral and communal stability by Bhitai is in concordance with the overall messages in the literature regarding devotion, patience, and sacrifice as the means to spiritual growth. This recognition of the role that women play in society gives them more importance than the roles that had been assigned to them. In this way, Bhitai celebrated the dedication of women and, at the same time, questioned the stereotypes that Society seeks to impose on women.

4.3 Social Justice and Equality

Bhitai's poetry is also closely connected with the issues of social justice and women's rights and dignity (Munawar et al., 2020). He focused on the position of women as subject agents in their lives and fighting against the norms that prevent them from exercising their agency. The work of Bhitai is also about the problems of women in patriarchal societies and their fight back against oppression (Hussain, 2022). For instance, in the story of Marui, the heroine does not conform to the canonical stereotypes of subordination and decency. She refused royal privileges and stood firm on her principles (Mirjat, 2018). Bhitai's poetry is a profound social commentary on the issue of inequality, and women represented in his work fight back against oppression with courage (Hussain, 2021). Their struggles are shown through their fighting and boldness, and his work still echoes as a cry for social justice and equality.

The poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is one of the voices which fight against social injustice and the oppression of women in particular. His verses do not agree with the strict norms of his time and instead praise women as the champions of modification who fight against oppression. Through Marui, he demonstrated the fight for power and the passion for one's beliefs, as depicted that real honour is not in submission but in honour. Bhitai's analysis of the patriarchy is still actual, and his poems are still actual to the modern audience, as they spark the debate on gender equality. Thus, he reveals their problems and challenges, making them strong and courageous in his work, calling for justice in society.

4.4 Modern Feminism and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's Heroines

Bhitai is a great saint and a reputed poet of Sindhi literature, and his songs are full of love, spirit, and societal norms. Through his portrayal of women, he has depicted women as independent and powerful, which is in sync with the feminist movement of today (Shakir, 2018). Bhitai's poetry is somewhat revolutionary in the sense that it questions the gender roles that are assigned to women by society. Bughio (2022) notes that his verses challenge the cliches and inequalities that women in patriarchal societies suffer. Their works also depict characters who do not conform to societal norms, which is also the case with today's feminist movement that promotes independence and equality. For instance, Suhni's passion for love and the way she confronts societal taboos is a courageous and bold act, as documented by Jatoi et al. (2019). Her story is consistent with the current feminist debates on women's rights to choose for themselves.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's women are not only bold and courageous but also free and independent, which is quite uncommon in traditional society. Thus, his work is closely connected to the modern feminist movement. Their females are not merely spectators but actors in the creation of their fate, as is the case now. In this way, Bhitai undermines the conventional norms of patriarchal societies through the means of his characters' strength and defiance. Bhitai is also relevant even today as he provides a basis for feminist analysis of the literature and shows that the battle for women's equality is not new but has gone on for centuries. He is still a progressive voice for gender equality and women's self-determination; his poetry always speaks about that.

4.5 Bhitai's Heroines: Empowerment and Agency

Bhitai's heroines, Sassui, Marui, Suhni and others face adversity with courage, loyalty, and inner resolve, thus challenging the conventional perception of feminine strength. Instead, Bhitai celebrated their heroism through their emotional and spiritual resilience, not through physical prowess. Shaikh et al. (2015) point out that Bhitai has depicted women as central to their own stories and challenged patriarchal norms. The strength and determination that Sassui demonstrated are not only that of a spiritual seeker but also of an empowered woman, thus supporting Bhitai's vision of women empowerment.

Bhitai's heroines are each a manifestation of a different kind of empowerment. Marui's integrity and resistance to oppression are shown by her rejection of wealth and status in favour of personal freedom (Khosro et al., 2023). The autonomy and determination of Suhni are shown by her defiance of forced marriage and her pursuit of love (Zehra & Brohi, 2023). While Noori's humility and grace are not as overt as active rebellion, they represent a quieter but no less significant form of empowerment (Bashir Ahmed Jatoi et al., 2019). Suhni represents the resilience of a woman who has to fight for her love and spiritual satisfaction, regardless of all the barriers and probabilities (Munawar et al., 2020).

4.6 Comparative Perspectives: Historical and Modern Feminism

In the context of his time, Bhitai's representation of women has feminist elements. Ahmed Bashir and Humera Naz (2017) state that his portrayal of women is feminist but not always consistent with today's feminism. However, his work provides us with a glimpse of the feminist movement before modern feminist movements (Munawar et al., 2020). Comparing Bhitai's heroines with contemporary feminist principles shows both the continuity and change in feminist thought. The Suhni mirrors the current fight for women's right to choose their partners, in line

with the struggle against forced marriages. Suhni's disobedience of marriage laws that oppress women is identical to feminist resistance to honor-based violence and legal restrictions on personal freedom. Modern feminist advocacy for integrity and self-determination is reflected in Marui's rejection of material wealth to pursue her homeland. Noori's empowerment through humility is consistent with modern feminist recognition of emotional labour and inner strength as forms of agency. Sassui's struggle to reach his husband shows her empowerment, autonomy and commitment which lead the modern feminism.

Bhitai's heroines are still active in feminist discourse and provide a rich understanding of the intersection of the historical and modern feminist movements. As Shaikh et al. (2015) pointed out, his portrayal of women is strong, wise, and morally resolved, and his work has a significant place in the discourse on gender equality. Bhitai's poetry was created in the context of his time. However, it is still relevant to the contemporary feminist struggles and connects the conversations about women's rights and empowerment of the past and the present. However, there is much more work to be done. Further inquiry is needed to investigate how his poetry relates to other topics related to social justice and equality. Also, more studies could explore how his work informs contemporary feminist theory and how it contributes to the current feminist activism for gender equality. These links would help to build on the existing knowledge of his literary legacy and its importance in contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

The poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai clearly reflects the ideology of feminism, which shows the strength, perseverance and independence of women in a society that was dominated by men. His portrayal of female characters as strong lovers of truth and justice and seekers of love goes against the conventional gender roles and presents a different picture of women as active subjects. In the context of spiritual devotion, social justice and fighting against the oppression of people by society, Bhitai not only reflects women's suffering but also applauds their fight and moral power. The characters like Sassui, Marui and Suhni are the real heroines of the story as they embody the qualities of persistence and determination, which are very much in sync with the present-day feminist movements.

When feminist themes are considered, they are significant not only in the historical analysis of Sindhi literature but also in the context of all gender studies. Bhitai can be considered as one of the earliest critics of gender inequality and, therefore, a pioneer of the feminist movement, whose ideas are still significant for present-day feminism. The current paper shows that his work is still significant and can be used in the context of discussing the place of women and their empowerment in South Asian literature.

The use of a narrative literature review in this study has been particularly valuable in synthesizing diverse feminist perspectives and interpretations of Bhitai's poetry across time. This approach allowed for a more holistic and interpretive understanding of how his portrayal of female characters resonates with evolving feminist discourses. Thus, through the modern feminist lens, scholars can still discover the contemporary importance of his poetic ideal in the fight for gender equality.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **Study Conception and Design:** Shazia Shah, Sarala Thulasi Palpanadan, Ishfaque Ahmed Abbasi; **Data Collection:** Shazia Shah; **Analysis and Interpretation of Results:** Shazia Shah, Sarala Thulasi Palpanadan, Ishfaque Ahmed Abbasi; **Draft Manuscript Preparation:** Shazia Shah. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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