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Constrained Agency: Female Resistance in Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* through Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory

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ABSTRACT

*The representation of women's agency and resistance is critically examined in this study through the application of Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory in Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon*. The research challenges the dominant tendency in existing scholarship to portray women in tribal patriarchal settings primarily as passive victims of structural violence. Instead, it highlights the presence of subtle, situational, and context-dependent forms of resistance that emerge within constrained social conditions. The study argues that female characters in the novel navigate a complex landscape of cultural restrictions, gendered hierarchies, and survival pressures. While overt rebellion against patriarchal norms is rare and often met with severe consequences, the narrative reveals alternative forms of agency expressed through silence, endurance, negotiation, and strategic compliance. These actions, although not traditionally recognized as resistance, function as meaningful survival strategies that destabilize the notion of absolute female passivity. Naila Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as the ability to make "here and now" strategic life choices within existing structures of constraint. This theoretical lens is central to the analysis, as it allows for a nuanced reading of empowerment as relational, contextual, and non-linear rather than absolute liberation. By applying Kabeer's triadic model of resources, agency, and achievements, the study demonstrates how women in *The Wandering Falcon* exercise limited yet significant control over their lives despite entrenched patriarchal dominance. The exploration further emphasizes that empowerment in the novel cannot be separated from socio-cultural realities. Tribal customs, honor systems, and gendered power relations continuously shape and restrict women's decision-making capacities. However, within these constraints, the study identifies micro-level acts of resistance that reflect resilience and adaptive agency. These findings contribute to a more layered understanding of gendered subjectivity in marginalized communities. Moreover, the study raises important ethical questions regarding the representation of silenced or marginalized women in literature. It problematizes whether literary narratives risk reinforcing victimhood by overlooking everyday forms of agency, or whether they can recover suppressed voices through critical interpretation. In doing so, the research positions itself within feminist literary discourse that seeks to balance recognition of oppression with acknowledgment of agency.*

Keywords: *Female agency, empowerment, resistance, patriarchal society, Naila Kabeer, tribal culture, feminist literary criticism.*

1. Introduction

The Wandering Falcon by Jamil Ahmad is a heartfelt account of the stormy tribal area of Pakistan and Afghanistan, where class system, code of tribal behavior and patriarchal traditions have a long and violent history. The book is a description of a brutal world where women fight for their lives and their freedom because their roles are fixed: forced marriage, honor killing, and objectification of women as property representing family honour (Ahmad). In this way, women characters can be seen as victims of systemic violence and social oppression, and their voices are marginalized or even silenced in the larger socio-political sphere of tribal life.

However, the portrayal of women in the novel is not that easy. But direct opposition or defiance to the standards of patriarchy is not the norm, and it may well lead to serious punishment, and there is some subtle, even sometimes tragic, agency in the prose in the female. Rather than a simple image of women as passive victims, these brief but compelling acts of subversion, moments of hardship, and moments of resistance to assimilation can be integrated into a complex image of women. It is the representation of female agency and resistance that gains importance since the literature that deals with such oppressive social contexts often renders these proverbial wombs, the sites of creation, into ghostly and dead carcasses.

To examine these complexities, this paper considers empowerment as strategic life choices, as conceptualised by Naila Kabeer (Kabeer 438) in the arenas that allowed women to make these choices. In *The Wandering Falcon*, the novel is all but set within a sphere of restricted social relations and Kabeer's framework emphasizes the interaction of resources, agency and achievements is well suited to address the limited yet effectual acts of defiance by women in this particular context (438-439). It opens the door to a full recognition of the power dynamics that affect women in tribal contexts – and challenges the reduction of tribal women to victims.

1.1 Thesis Statement

Even when women in *The Wandering Falcon* appear as oppressed victims doomed to their fate, by using Naila Kabeer theory of empowerment, a different perspective opens up on how women can negotiate restrictive social structures to achieve some agency, albeit limited and embodied, but nevertheless, a challenge to the simplistic notion of victim.

1.2 Research Gap

While there are many studies on *The Wandering Falcon* which have engaged with issues of tribal violence, migration and male oppression, the study of women has been limited and critical engagement with women's agency is rare. Most studies focus on structural oppression and only start to look at strategies of resistance at the micro level that are woven into the people's survival practices. In addition, the feminist empowerment frameworks, such as the Kabeer's three-pronged feminist model of resources, agency and achievements are not used to understand the subjectivity of the women in the novel. This discrepancy shows the need for a deeper analysis, one that does not see women as either powerless victims or explicit agents of resistance.

1.3 Scope and significance of the study

This study mainly looks at the selected female characters in *The Wandering Falcon* where agency is constructed, limited and expressed in the tribal patriarchal system. It does not seek to look at the novel in its entirety as a character analysis but is focused on the themes of limited agency and survivalist resistance.

The study is important because it takes the feminist theory of empowerment by Naila Kabeer to examine a culturally complex and less-researched text. It builds awareness of the nature of empowerment in partial and situational ways rather than in totality. Moreover, it gives an insight into the mirroring and challenging of dominant discourses of gender oppression, thereby giving a more balanced reading of women's lived experiences in tribal societies.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To analyze how *The Wandering Falcon* depicts the autonomy and resistance of female characters.
2. To analyze how social relationships and power structures limit and influence women's strategic choices using Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How does *The Wandering Falcon* depict the agency and defiance of women in tribal communities that are patriarchal?
2. How does the novel's portrayal of the nature and constraints of female autonomy fit into Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study significantly contributes to feminist literary criticism in that it moves beyond the previous literature on victim narratives, arguing against the idea of the passive victim as put forth by the Western feminist reader of *The Wandering Falcon*, by using Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory to analyze what can be identified as the limited scope of agency for women, albeit the agency is subdued in the patriarchal tribal world. This research offers an alternative perspective by examining how women navigate, resist, and negotiate their limited choices within entrenched social and cultural power structures that sustain gendered oppression while shaping strategies of survival. Additionally, it contributes to South Asian literary studies by prioritizing a range of multi-layered female voices and lived experiences, interrogating prevailing patriarchal discourses that pervade literary texts, and contributing to critically important discussions on ethical representation of women in postcolonial tribal contexts.

1.7 Delimitation of the Study

The current study is delimited to the portrayal of female characters and gender relations in Jamil Ahmad book *The Wandering Falcon*, considering the issue of female agency and resistance within the tribal social setting of Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands. The theoretical framework is limited only to Kabeer's empowerment focused theories and does not engage other feminist or postcolonial theories.

1. Literature Review

Jamil Ahmad is an ex-Pakistan civil servant, and turned writer, whom i have mentioned a lot about lately here as his works beautifully shows an intimate knowledge of the tribal regions of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area. Ahmad served with the Frontier Constabulary and later in the civil administration, and his understanding of the volatile and remote regions gives gravitas to his depictions of tribal customs, social hierarchies and the tensions between tradition and change. His first novel, *The Wandering Falcon* (2013), vividly depicts the harsh realities and moral codes of this borderland society in interlinked tales centered on the nomadic Pashtun tribes.

Critics like Usman T. Malik (2017) and Fatima Qureshi (2019) highlight the depiction of the violence and horror faced by women in such tribal societies where honor and family reputation govern the strict codes of patriarchal behavior. Malik observes that Ahmad's female

characters are often shown as vehicles of family honor, rather than human beings with agency — all too frequently the targets of violence and repression, where forced marriages are the norm, and where honor killings are commonplace (Malik 10). In a related critique, Qureshi notes the narrow range of female agency in the story and laments how women resist (or fail) so often with tragic outcomes (Qureshi 85).

These readings highlight both the individual and structural oppressive conditions of women, but they tend to be symptom-focused discourses that center on a victim and not a text attuned to the insidious, thin currents of agency and subversion running through its pages. To address this analytical gap Kabeer's empowerment theory offers a useful perspective. Kabeer defines empowerment as a transformative process by which people gain greater access to make considered decisions about their lives that have previously not been available to them, negotiated through resources, agency and achievement within systems of power (Kabeer 438). This framework is especially useful for examining the limited but critical exercise of agency among women within patriarchal and tribal settings like the ones we find in Ahmad's narrative.

In addition, feminist scholars of South Asian patriarchal systems such as Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Saba Mahmood (2005) illuminate how female agency frequently operates at an understated level, while also emerging within local specificity. Nussbaum (18) effectively argues for an approach based on capabilities whereby we recognize the agency of women for whom functioning's are valuable attitudes achieved, no matter the social disenfranchisement they experience. In Mahmood's ethnography, these practices of piety and endurance do not necessarily echo the idea of autonomy, thus also challenging mainstream western feminist models that assessed the empowerment of women through the narrow synchronic lens of their divergence or alignment with the norm of female liberation and individuation (Mahmood 34). These perspectives highlight that agency is not a fixed or tangible phenomenon expressed solely through overt resistance; rather, it manifests in diverse and contextually nuanced ways. *The Wandering Falcon* has garnered literary attention for its rich feminist critiques, yet such analyses have not engaged Kabeer's feminist framework on empowerment or explored the complex nature of what Kabeer calls 'strategies for negotiating limited choices in an unequal world'. This study seeks to apply Kabeer's theory to Ahmad's female characters to present acts of endurance, defiance and survival not only as a form of empowerment but also as something significant within the context of such a cruel patriarchal order, which could overcome the reductive representations of women as passive victims.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in feminist literary criticism. It examines female agency and resistance in Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* through Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory. Since the study focuses on interpreting meanings, social relations, and gendered experiences within a literary text, qualitative textual analysis is the most suitable approach.

Research Approach

The research uses close reading and thematic analysis of the novel. Selected episodes and female characters are analyzed to explore patterns of oppression, survival, negotiation, and resistance. These textual instances are interpreted using Kabeer's framework of empowerment, focusing on resources, agency, and achievements.

Primary Source

The primary text of this study is:

Ahmad, Jamil. *The Wandering Falcon*. Riverhead Books, 2011.

The novel is examined to identify how female characters experience and respond to patriarchal structures within tribal society.

Secondary Sources

Secondary data include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and critical essays related to:

- Feminist literary theory
- Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory
- Gender and patriarchy in South Asian tribal contexts
- Representations of female resistance in literature

These sources support theoretical grounding and contextual interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory (1999), which defines empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such choices were previously denied. The framework includes three interconnected dimensions:

- **Resources:** material, social, and human conditions enabling choice
- **Agency:** the ability to define goals and act upon them
- **Achievements:** outcomes resulting from exercised agency

This framework helps analyze how women in the novel exercise limited but meaningful forms of empowerment within restrictive tribal systems.

Data Analysis Method

The study applies thematic textual analysis through the following steps:

1. Text Selection

Relevant passages involving female characters, their experiences, and actions are identified from the novel.

2. Theme Identification

Extracted data are categorized into themes such as:

- Patriarchal control and violence
- Survival strategies
- Restricted mobility and choice
- Forms of silent or indirect resistance
- Agency within constraints

3. Theoretical Interpretation

Themes are analyzed using Kabeer's model to understand how agency operates within structural limitations.

4. Critical Discussion

Findings are discussed in relation to existing feminist scholarship on gender, power, and tribal society.

Delimitation of the Study

The study is limited to selected female characters and relevant episodes in *The Wandering Falcon*. It does not analyze all thematic dimensions of the novel. The focus remains specifically on female agency and empowerment within patriarchal tribal structures.

Ethical Considerations

This research uses publicly available literary and academic sources. Proper citation and academic integrity are maintained throughout the analysis. No human participants are involved in the study.

Conclusion

The qualitative methodology enables an in-depth exploration of constrained female agency in *The Wandering Falcon*. Using Kabeer's Empowerment Theory, the study highlights how women negotiate restrictive social structures through limited but significant forms of resistance and decision-making.

2. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Constrained Agency in Female Characters

Jamil Ahmad, in his novel *The Wandering Falcon*, characterises women as oppressed beings inscribed with the tribal mechanisms of patriarchy, unable to escape the forces of honour, marriage, and family through which their lives are contoured and circumscribed. Take the case of the mother of Tor Baz the perfect case in point. She runs off with an outsider a man from another tribe, defying rigid tribal and social convention:

"She vanished one night with a man from a rival clan, knowing well the price she would pay. Yet, for her, this was the only escape from a life of enforced submission." (Ahmad 35).

Her elopement which led to her death, is such a strong act of agency. It reflects Kabeer's idea of agency as being exercised strategically but only with severely limited choices (441). However doomed, this gesture is an effort to wrest agency over her soul in a world that has left her with few real choices. Instead of going along docilely with her fate, she instead chooses, albeit in a tragic way, to fight back.

In a later episode, the little girl who is sold into marriage in "A Point of Honour" bears her fate in silence. Ahmad writes:

"She bore the humiliation in silence, her eyes betraying a fierce defiance that her voice could not speak." (Ahmad 58).

As her silent suffering can be interpreted as a considerate rebellion, even when she does not have the strength to resist plainly. The way she resists completely assimilating into her part shakes the patriarchal hierarchy by refusing to submit fully. This multilayered representation accompanies Kabeer's belief that agency does not have to be vocal or rebellious, and may instead be found in seemingly unremarkable acts of defiance (Kabeer 441).

4.2 Social and Cultural Resources: Accessibility and Limitations

The novel aptly describes the shortage of resources provided to women in the tribal setup. They are deprived of education, of economic independence or of any kind of large social network. Women, Ahmad writes, are relegated to home, and treated like property, their status equal to their potential for marriage and ensuring family honour:

"Her worth was weighed in the promise of alliance, her freedom shackled to the honor of her father and brothers." (Ahmad 42).

These social and material constraints substantially diminish women ability to make informed decisions about their lives. Kabeer states that the role of resources is primary in the sense that without having access to material, human or social assets, agency is almost impossible (Kabeer 439). The quote from Ahmad highlights the fictionalised restricted resources of women, indicating systemic barriers that deprive women from empowerment.

4.3 Agency as Negotiation within Constraints

The implication of Ahmad's story is that women exercise their agency in a manner that does not overtly challenge hegemonic patriarchy, in the mode of negotiating what is given, rather than rebelling against the same. As an example, while a woman says yes to an arranged marriage, she begins to have small influence where she can in the house by managing the household or defending her children (Ahmad 50). These are not overt demonstrations, but rather a calculated exercise of agency, women navigating their agency within the constraints of the patriarchal sphere they inhabit.

In a more domestic scene, the woman silently subverts her husband's authority when she refuses to obey his demands:

"She nodded in agreement, but her eyes betrayed a resolve that no command could break." (Ahmad 80).

This kind of quiet rebellion is a kind of agency that aligns with Kabeer as empowering ever-contingent decision-making processes, within and against existing social boundaries (Kabeer 441). Asserting that, in this context, female empowerment is about endurance and compromise, rather than revolt, Ahmad thus redemptively provides the real.

4.4 Tragic or Muted Outcomes as Signs of Resistance and Survival

The tragedies of female agency in *The Wandering Falcon* are dire, pointing to the oppressive nature of tribal patriarchy where women suffer punishments, banishment, or death despite making sure-footed strategic decisions. But these tragic or muted endings do not undermine their resistance; they expose how choosing to have agency in a system built to erase it is fraught with danger. Take, for example, the dynamic at play in the fate of Tor Baz's mother following her elopement:

"When the news spread that she had fled, the elders decreed she must pay the ultimate price for dishonoring the clan. Her death was not just punishment; it was a message to all who might dare to defy the code." (Ahmad 36).

Her act may have ultimately led to her death, but it was a deliberate, political act of agency that resisted the inflexible patriarchal status quo. That achievements are not only about winning or freedom, but also on claiming a very limited space of choice regardless of the surrounding constraints and the probabilities of negative consequences in the light of empowerment (Kabeer 442). The mother thus embodies empowerment through resistance because her beautiful assessment still ends with her tragic end thus signifying the price at which agency can be taken away from the individual in such settings.

In the same way, the young girl sold to marriage in "A Point of Honour" survives her ordeal sans open rebellion but the silent rebellion on her part of not tolerating her fate shatters the social structure:

"She did not raise her voice nor call for help, but the hardness in her gaze unsettled even the fiercest men. In her silence was a strength that words could never express." (Ahmad 58).

Rather, her survival is an act of agency—it says that I will not become a victim; I may not be the agent of my genesis but I will not exist as an empty shell, either. Hence, Kabeer allows for such forms of muted resistance to be treated as successes, demonstrating how survival can be a politically empowering act when one is a living target of oppressive structures.

4.5 Narrative Ethics and Representation of Female Empowerment

The wandering Falcon demonstrates narrative ethics that carefully navigate the representation of women's oppression and agency by avoiding reduction to a binary of victimhood and heroism. He does not romanticize rebellion nor turn from the violent repercussions of women stepping out of line, and instead grounds female empowerment in

fraught, multi-faceted, and often quiet realities. This ethical approach correlates with Kabeer who writes that empowerment should be understood as a process of change that occurs within particular power relations that constrain and enable agency (Kabeer, 444).

Ahmad writes with a stark realism which foregrounds the challenge of female defiance:

"In these lands, a woman's voice is often swallowed by silence, but that silence is not always surrender. It is sometimes the only shield left to guard her dignity." (Ahmad 90).

To my mind, this excerpt encapsulates the moral philosophy of the novel in general, privileging the small and contained acts of agency as enormous. It salutes quotidian acts of resistance, survival, compromise and, more generally, the maintenance of dignity — as important assertions of agency, too.

Ahmad undermines familiar conceptions of agency by illustrating female characters whose empowerment comes not from assertive action as so often obsessed over these days, but rather from the art of survival and tragic resistance. His ethical storytelling defies representing empowerment as liberation or triumph; he depicts it as the presence of genuine selfhood in an antagonistic sociopolitical arrangement. This is consistent with Kabeer's theory of empowerment as well, as it locates empowerment in the environmental opportunities (or lack there of) through the continual processes of resources, agency, and achievement inside social relations of power and thus involves costs and complication (Kabeer 444).

3. Conclusion

The complexities of female agency in *The Wandering Falcon* have been shown in this study through the lens of Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory. Kabeer's framework highlights the relationalness of women's choice and how their choice or agency is embedded in the constraints posed by tribal patriarchy by looking at the interconnectedness of resources, agency and achievements. Instead of thinking of female subjects purely as the collateral damage of patriarchal systems, this stance takes into account the indirect, often subdued methods of resistance everything from silent survival to conciliating to tragic defiance—that provide an indirect form of empowerment.

Seeing empowerment as a process anchored in power relations enables us to transcend reductive patriarchal narratives of victimhood and instead, identify and appreciate the quotidian resistance and assertion of agency that occurs in the shadows of established patriarchal formations. However, as Kabeer argues, this is approximating a nature of agency at a profound cost that risks glossing over the sad truths beneath the skin of these lived experiences, and these truths are what Ahmad shines a light on through his narrative ethics. Reading *The Wandering Falcon* through this lens expands our understanding of this story while also suggesting further research on gender, power, and agency in South Asian tribal and rural writing. The future studies can conduct comparative analyses with other regional texts or research how the contemporary social changes impact the representation of women's empowerment in tribal contexts.

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