



Literary Resistance in the Progressive Tradition: The Fiction of Saeeda Gazdar

Adeeba Akram¹, Irfan Waheed Usmani²

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Abstract

Literature has long served as a tool of resistance, questioning dominant ideas and giving voice to suppressed experiences. Urdu literature of post-colonial Pakistan has been no exception. It has an established tradition of dissent and resistance to state repression; the Progressive Writers' Movement, in particular, has been at the forefront. Women writers in Urdu literature contributed significantly to this radical domain of literary resistance by drawing attention to political repression, gender inequity, and the realities of disadvantaged people. Saeeda Gazdar's fiction is a product of politically chaotic decades of post-Partition Pakistan, marked by authoritarian rule, censorship, and ideological control. This study employs an empirical approach that uses historical discourse analysis to analyze 'Aag Gulistan Na Bani' and 'Adhi Gawahi' - two of Saeeda's significant works of literary resistance. The article argues that by using fiction as a space to interrogate state control, the misapplication of religion, and moral hypocrisy, Saeeda Gazdar has shown resistance to martial law, surveillance, and the use of religion as a tool in the face of state repression and socio-political inequalities. It further argues that Saeeda Gazdar's literary works effectively demonstrate the use of literature as a powerful tool of resistance against oppressive state structures and examines her fiction as a powerful voice among the Progressive writers.

Key words: Literary Resistance, Urdu Fiction, Progressive Urdu Literature, Saeeda Gazdar.

Introduction

Following the division of the Indian subcontinent, the political and cultural landscape of Pakistan was influenced by debates around national identity and

ideology (Usmani, 2016, pp. 304-332). These debates were closely related to the legacy of the Progressive

¹ PhD Scholar, Institute of History, Government College University & Lecturer in History, Government Graduate College for Women, Baghbanpura, Lahore, Pakistan

² Assistant Professor, Institute of History, Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan

✉ deeba0313@gmail.com

Writers' Movement (PWM),¹ which had previously stood for the cause of social justice, equality, and tried to raise consciousness against all forms of exploitation. However, after independence, socialist ideas related to PWM were gradually seen as contradictory to the nascent state's Islamic ideological bases. This resulted in a divide in literary circles as writers like Mumtaz Shirin, Samad Shaheen, and Hasan Askari argued for "Islamic" or "Pakistani" literature affiliated with national ideology. Simultaneously, there were writers who continued to engage with questions of inequality, power, and social justice, a trajectory that increasingly led them into conflict with state narratives.

Amidst the already precarious political landscape of Pakistan, Ayub Khan's martial law in 1958 and the subsequent military governments of Yahya Khan and Zia-ul-Haq further strengthened authoritarianism and exacerbated Pakistan's socio-political and ideological issues. There was resistance to political and intellectual control during the Ayub era, and Urdu writers were actively involved. Examples of radical resistance by progressive *littérateurs* abound, but I will confine myself to mentioning just two names: Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habib Jalib. Both were articulate critics of dictatorship, and '*Dastoor*' was a "protest anthem" during Ayub's martial law. The state-society relationship and civil institutions were also affected by recurring military interventions and limited democratic participation (Jalal, 1991, p. 295).

Urdu fiction also emerged as a major site of resistance, with writers such as Hajra Masroor, Akhtar Jamal, Shaukat Siddiqui, Ijaz Rahi, Zahida Hina, Rasheed Amjad, Masood Ashar, to name only a few, emphasizing political pressure and loss of social freedoms. Writers employed symbolism and abstraction to express dissent, and translations of Pablo Neruda, Mahmoud Darwish, Forugh Farrokhzad and Nazim Hikmet brought new forms of resistance to Urdu literature (Amjad, 1995, p. 52).

Pakistani literature was at a very important crossroads by the 1970s. The fall of Dhaka in 1971 raised questions about national unity and provoked discussions of identity, individuality, and the nature of national ideology and lived experience.² In the democratic era (1971-1977), Urdu '*afšana*', after undergoing a period of excessive symbolism during the era of censorship, resumed its narrative and realism (Naqvi, 2017, p. 72). Another watershed was Zia-ul-Haq's martial law in

1977, which resulted in a further escalation of ideological control, censorship, and constraints on the media and education (Azam, 2023). In response, writers created a discourse of protest, using symbolism and metaphor. Masood's '*Apni apni Sachchai* (Everyone has their own truth)' and '*Bela nahi rey, joldi joldi* (There is no time, hurry up)' were written against the backdrop of East Pakistan's separation; Zahida Hina's '*Titliyan Dhoondne Wali*' and '*Bud-o-Nabud ka Aashob*', and Hajra Masroor's '*Ek Aur Nara*' depict the trauma, fear, and repression of the period. These examples amply demonstrate how literature became a significant tool for challenging authority and voicing dissent.

In this context, Saeeda Gazdar's fiction became significant for its ability to reveal state repression and challenge authoritarianism. It compels me to observe that, despite the depth and potency of her work, Gazdar has not received the attention she deserved, and critics dismissed it as '*Mojoda sorat hal par tabsra*' (commentary on the present situation) (Batool, 2017, p. 5). This article shows that Gazdar played an important role in Pakistani postcolonial literature as a voice of resistance. By exploring Gazdar's fictional oeuvre, it examines how personal struggles with collective histories of oppression turn storytelling into a challenge to silence and dominant ideology, reinforcing the tradition of dissent in Urdu literature. It further argues that Gazdar transforms day-to-day emotions into different ways of intellectual rebellion, and these become a locus of political sense. Using textual and discourse analysis, the study investigates how Gazdar attaches political significance to ordinary experiences using language, narrative, symbolism, historical contexts, and her own experiences to make them into intellectual and political counter-resistances

Literature Review

This work is anchored in scholarship on literary resistance, which conceptualizes literature not only as an aesthetic expression, but as a mode of dissent that is critical of injustice, political, ideological, and cultural dominance.

Barbara Harlow, while theorizing resistance literature, points out that resistance literature is a politically engaged form of writing that directly challenges dominant ideological and cultural structures. (Harlow, 1987) Similarly, Russell Hamilton's notion of 'committed poetry' focused on literature's pedagogical

1 See also, Waseem, M. (2021). Political conflict in Pakistan. Hurst & Company. Naqvi, S. N. (2008). Mourning Indo-Muslim modernity: Moments in post-colonial Urdu literary culture [Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University].

2 Writers and intellectuals reacted to state violence and political crisis. Kishwar Naheed was able to record what was happening in

East Bengal but her report was not permitted to be printed. See Yaqin, A. (2023). Gender, sexuality and feminism in Pakistani Urdu writing. Folio Books.

method and preserving memory to perpetuate collective consciousness in anti-colonial efforts. (Hamilton, 1978)

More recently, Hiyem Cheurfa has generalized the framework to gendered contexts. In *Contemporary Arab Women and the Politics of Resistance*, Cheurfa studies the 'life writing forms emerging from the contemporary, revolutionary Arab region as cultural sites for the articulation of resistance'. (Cheurfa, 2023) Collectively, these works extend the literature on resistance to militant rhetoric to inclusive, gendered counter-discourse.

While these studies were largely framed within broader anti-colonial historiography, PWM has, in the subcontinent, established the tradition of dissent in Urdu literature. Carlo Coppola's pioneering work on the Progressive Writers' Movement examines the progressive literary traditions in South Asia. (Coppola, 1975) The works of Talat Ahmad (Ahmed, 2009) and Rakhshanda Jalil (Jalil, 2020) have examined the progressive discourse from nationalistic, political, and cultural perspectives. Besides this influential scholarship, academic and scholarly literature explore poetry and fiction as sites of protest against martial law, censorship, and ideological suppression and extend the framework of resistance from a colonial struggle to postcolonial repression of the state. The works of Saadia Toor (2011), Raza Ali (2013), and Irfan Waheed Usmani (2015) examine the radical role of PWM in challenging hegemonic state narrative.

Sadia Toor's work, *'The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan'*, examines progressive writers and intellectuals as important agents of resistance within the Pakistani Left. (Toor, 2011) Likewise, Irfan Waheed Usmani's thesis explores journalism, progressive literature and films to demonstrate the "progressive discourse" as a tool of Left-wing radicalism and resistance in Pakistan. (Usmani, 2016) These works collectively offer a valuable lens for analyzing the literary, political, and progressive engagements of Pakistan. This paper situates itself within this stream of scholarship and explores Saeeda Gazdar's writing as a radical space to challenge authoritarian forms of the state, ideological oppression, and dissent through literature.

Although there is a large body of academic scholarship focusing on resistance literature in Pakistan and the

contribution of progressive writers, Saeeda Gazdar's works in the field of resistance literature remain relatively limited. One can describe the theses of Aiman Batool (*Saeeda Gazdar ke Afsano Mein Siyasi o Samaji Shaoor*, 2017) and Samina Naz (*Saeeda Gazdar ki Adabi Khidmat*, 2016) (Naz, 2016) as pioneering efforts in this context. Both theses offer a preliminary study of Gazdar's thematic concerns and narrative strategy. Although these works highlight her efforts to raise socio-political awareness in Urdu literary circles, they leave room to explore how Progressive Urdu writers navigated the challenges posed by martial law authorities in a politically charged atmosphere in Pakistan during the 70s and 80s. This paper aims to expand the scholarship on Saeeda Gazdar by providing an in-depth analysis of her fictional corpus and highlighting her contributions in resisting the hegemonic state apparatus.

Research Questions

The article addresses the following questions:

1. In her fiction, how does Saeeda Gazdar explore political repression and ideological control?
2. In what ways do her stories introduce rebellion against state authority using characters, themes, and narrative situations?
3. How does her narrative work translate the micro-level struggles of ordinary individuals into a critique of macro-level authoritarian power dynamics?

Resistance and the Progressive Ethos in Saeeda Gazdar's Fiction

It would be useful to contextualize Saeeda Gazdar¹ in her age so as to highlight the formative influences as a writer that made her a distinctive voice of resistance in literature of post-colonial Pakistan. Born into a literary family, Gazdar had a strong political background, surrounded by her brothers Muhammad Sarwar and Muhammad Akhtar. Muhammad Sarwar was an active student leader and one of the founders of the Democratic Student Federation. (Mahmood, 2024) Her elder brother Akhtar nurtured in her a sense of social responsibility by establishing a home library and educating underprivileged children. (Gazdar S. , 1958, pp. 113-14)

¹ Born on 14 November 1943 in Allahabad, she migrated to Pakistan in 1951 with her family and settled in Karachi. She received her early education there and later graduated with a degree in English Literature. She married Mushtaq Gazdar, a noted documentary filmmaker. Her poetry is collected in two volumes, 'Tawq-o-Daar Ka Mausam' [1984] and 'Zanjeer-e-Rooz-o-Shab' [1986], are noted for their thematic depth and stylistic innovation. From 1974 to 1977, she collaborated with the progressive intellectual Syed Sibte Hasan in publishing the journal 'Pakistani Adab', which became an important

part of resistance literature. She also wrote short plays for the magazine 'She.'

The environment in which she lived in Karachi was an active hub for writers and intellectuals like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ibn-e-Insha, Hafeez Kardar, and Syed Sibte Hasan, adding to her literary sensibility (Haroon)¹. Her own marriage to Mushtaq Gazdar, an eminent filmmaker, and the environment in which she was raised by her brothers placed her at the heart of a long series of progressive literary partnerships dedicated to modern, humanist ideals, maintaining progressive thinking as a central element of her creative work.

Her intellectual outlook was further shaped by translation work, especially Shahidullah Kaiser's Bengali novel '*Sarang Bau*' (*Malah ki Bewi*), which deepened her appreciation for the plight of the political victim and the social outcast, as well as the oppressive political conditions of the time. Zia-ul-Haq's martial rule further strengthened her devotion to democratic resistance and the documentation of histories of marginalization and silence.

Her short stories depict the miseries of society through class hierarchy, patriarchy, and authoritarianism, and this is a testament to her strong belief in progressive ideology, social justice, and resistance. Using 'language as a means of liberation: subverting hegemonic agency of the oppressor' (Khawar, 2015) and political activism in accordance with progressive thinking, she wrote: "The only way I have left," she said, 'is to say whatever is going on in whatever way it can be said, in poetry, in prose, in free verse, in any form, in any manner.'" (Gazdar S., 1984., p. 22)

In Urdu literature, resistance is an established tradition as mentioned before, and one can find a number of literary collections and academic works on these themes; however, "resistance literature"² in "real terms" appeared during the period of military rule of General Zia, with more authors and thinkers coming out in protest against authoritarian rule. (Mahmood, 2024)³ Urdu fiction especially reacted against the growing censorship, inhuman punishments, and strict control of martial law authorities. Within eight months of Zia's martial law, a collection of fourteen short stories (*Gawahi* - Testimony) focusing on the theme of

resistance was published, edited by Ijaz Rahi, who was subsequently suspended from service due to the publication of this work. (Amjad, 1995, p. 52)

Although there was censorship in electronic and print media, the press was dubbed the 'public enemy number one.' (Niazi, 1994, p. xi.) The poets and writers responded with clear vigor and wrote against religious orthodoxy as well as harsh punishments during the martial law regime of Zia. Saeeda Gazdar's aptly described the forced silence of the press:

"The newspapers make headlines: two hundred thousand people watched the lashes being given; three hundred thousand people watched the hangings. But no editorial is written to say how inhuman this all is. Do not bring a man so low." (Gazdar S., 1980, p. 14)

These observations highlight the role and responsibility that literature took, which the state-controlled media seldom succeeded in fulfilling. In this context, the literature of Progressive writers takes on critical significance. Saeeda Gazdar's fiction can be situated within this broader tradition of resistance, as her works engage with power, repression, and dissent. The following section examines her major works and their contribution to debates on resistance and Urdu literature.

Saeeda Gazdar's short-story collections '*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*' (1980) and '*Adhi Gawahi*' (1986) occupy a significant place in Pakistani fiction for their depiction of life under authoritarian rule. Beyond individual and domestic experiences, they explore censorship, surveillance, suppression, and the silencing of dissent. Gazdar transforms ordinary people into witnesses⁴ who challenge systemic injustice and the ways state and social structures combine to silence dissent.

'*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*' (1980) consists of eleven stories dealing with political repression, limited freedoms, and the disturbance of cultural life. Stories like '*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*' (The Fire Never Blossomed into a

1 The memoir 'Yadoon ke Dareeche' is written by Saeeda Gazdar's sister Shahida Haroon. It is an unpublished, undated account of her brother, Muhammad Akhtar and family that can be

2 Literature of resistance is a product of political repression, social inequality, and state control. It gained prominence during national liberation movements and shares common ground with South Asian progressive literature in its critique of injustice and promotion of social awareness. It gained special importance in Pakistan in periods of military rule, when political censorship and ideological control influenced literary output. See Naazir Mahmood, *Pen and Politics: Resistance in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2021), 9.

3 See also Iqbal, T. (2015). *Pakistani Urdu afsana: Siyasi aur tareekhi tanazur*. Fiction House. Nayyar, N. A. (2022). *Mazahmat aur*

Urdu afsana. In *Yeh qissa kya hai ma'ni ka*. Sang-e-Meel Publications.

4 The term "witness" is used here in a general literary sense to suggest the capacity of literature to record, represent, and respond to experiences of violence, injustice, and historical crisis. For discussions of "witness literature" and the role of writing in documenting such realities, see "The Writer as Witness: Why We Need Literature to Document Atrocities—at Home and Abroad," *Zócalo Public Square*, January 11, 2021; and Minoli Salgado, *Witness Literature: Culture, Memory and Contested Truths* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), which examines how fiction, testimony, and narrative forms engage with sites of violence and contested truth.

Garden), '*Pahiya*' (The Wheel), '*Koyal aur General*' (The Cuckoo and the General), and '*Tamgha*' (The Medal) evoke the atmosphere of martial law and themes of fear and authoritarianism. The collection also addresses gender, class, and identity: '*Neelam*' portrays a woman driven into sex work by economic hardship, while '*Hindustani-Pakistani*' examines post-Partition identity and '*Chadhawe ki Chadar*' (Wreath of Gratitude) explores the exploitation of a lower-class woman.

In her second anthology, '*Ādhi Gawāhī*' (1986), with fourteen stories, her attention is more focused on legal, political and social injustice. The title story is an indictment of gender discrimination through the *Qanun-e-Shahadat* (Law of Evidence), and 'Daku' (The Bandit)

and 'Zillatoon ke Mare' (The Humiliated) depict police brutality. While '*Naya Qaida*' exposes the ways authoritarian concepts are being ingrained in the minds of the younger generation, '*Silsila*' (The Chain) brings together the memory of Hasan Nasir and the history of political persecution.

The brief overview above offers a general understanding of Gazdar's thematic concerns. This is followed by a discourse analysis of the selected stories to examine how Gazdar demonstrates power, ideology, and resistance through language, narrative techniques, historical references, and everyday experiences. The analytical framework used for the textual discussion is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Reading Saeeda Gazdar's Fiction*

Literary work	Ideological Positioning	Political/social context	Language / narrative strategy	Intertextuality / historical reference	Personal experience and resistance
Aag Gulistan Na Bani	The repressive state ideology vs. dissent	Authoritarianism, censorship	Direct language and the reference of epic challenges official silence.	Gilgamesh links modern-day repression to an ancient tradition of struggle against power.	Contemporary expressions of repression became act of resistance.
Koyal aur General (The Cuckoo and the General)	Military rule vs. Left	Suppression of Left activists	Juxtaposition and contrast: "Left, right!" and "Fire!" turn the language of discipline into a symbol of state violence.	Young left activists face punishment, reflecting the repression of progressive activists under military rule.	School parade juxtaposed the spectacle of concealed violence
Hindustani, Pakistani	Religious nationalism vs. plural identity	Post-Partition transformations of identity and intellectual control	The discourse of <i>Adaab/Salaam</i> illustrates everyday speech turning into an identity conflict.	Memories of pre-partition India.	Ahmed's isolation shows the personal implications of ideological control.
Naya Qaida (New Textbook)	Martial law, political violence, education, generational consciousness	Authoritarian discourse shaping consciousness of children.	Familiar alphabet words are replaced with words associated with guns, hanging, banditry, martyrdom, and lashes.	The vocabulary reflects the political atmosphere of martial law.	Political violence enters childhood
Ādhi Gawāhī	Gender inequality, law, persecution,	Silencing dissent and limiting women's	Dialogic and irony expose	Qanun-e-Shahadat – a prominent feature	The wife's testimony and the professor's

(Half Testimony)	ideological repression	testimony through patriarchal Legal machinery	diminished legal status of women	of the Zia era regarding women.	persecution connect gendered and political forms of silencing.
Warrant	State authority vs. intellectual freedom	Issue of censorship and control of press	The official seriousness of the police inspector is undermined by heavy irony and absurdity.	Reflects the historical repression of journalists during Zia's regime.	Persecution of a dead journalist symbolizes wider intellectual insecurities.
Dhaara (Flow)	Gender, political consciousness, historical narratives, military power	Dominant historical narratives and military figures are challenged.	Female voice questions established narratives	The mention of Muhammad bin Qasim links the contemporary political consciousness with inherited historical narratives.	A woman is depicted as a politically and historically aware subject.

*Note. Author's analysis based on close reading of Saeeda Gazdar's selected short stories.

'*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*' is told in the first person by a young woman whose voice is both personal and political. As a student, she is deeply invested – emotionally and intellectually in her male classmate due to their shared beliefs in freedom, human rights and social change. Their shared idealism is shattered by the state's authority under martial law rules. The secret agencies arrested him due to his radical thoughts, and even the narrator herself would be called to the interrogation. (Gazdar, 1980)

The interrogation scene turns out to be the emotional and political center-point of the story. The authorities inform her, 'We know you are innocent.... You are a mere simple innocent girl.... just give us the names and address.' (Gazdar, 1980) Their language seems protective, yet the tone sounds coercive. As they talk of her decency, they ran their tongues over their lips, and they look at her youth and beauty with a predatory look. This instance reveals the hypocrisy of a regime that boasts moral and religious authority publicly and privately humiliates and objectifies a woman. State power is not only repressive there, but it is highly gendered.

Notably, the story opens with an excerpt of the Epic of Gilgamesh.¹ The portrayal of power Gilgamesh asserts over his brides, 'First this king and then the rightful

husband', establishes a pattern of power. Power is before law; the ruler is before morality. It is important that this is justified by the fact that all these happen "with the will of the gods." (Gazdar, 1980, p. 9) It shows how tyranny tends to imitate under divine sanction. Reading the epic provides alongside the contemporary narrative offers a useful background for interpreting the story. The arrested classmate is like *Enkidu*² - the one who dares to challenge the tyrannical order and proclaims, "I have come to change the old systems." (Gazdar, 1980, p. 8) He represents the opposing intelligentsia and political agitators who opposed authoritarian systems even at the risk of being incarcerated. Meanwhile, the narrator both becomes into a witness to and a victim of the system. Her body and voice are occupied by political repression and patriarchal control. The characters of the Sumerian epic 'Gilgamesh' link the story of modern-day repression with an older tradition of human struggle against power. Gazdar presents the epic in plain and simple language, drawing parallels between the ancient text and the modern setting.

This criticism is enhanced by the title, '*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*'. It reminds the reader of the Abrahamic story, in which Abraham was thrown into a fire by the tyrant *Namrud*, only to be saved by the miraculous turning of the fire into coolness and safety. Instead, in Gazdar's

1 The Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Mesopotamian epic, is among the earliest known literary texts and explores themes of kingship, mortality, and human struggle.

2 Enkidu, in The Epic of Gilgamesh, is the companion of Gilgamesh whose life and death highlight themes of friendship and mortality.

narrative, the fire transforms into a garden. With repression being rationalized in religious terms under the rule of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who tried to portray it as an Islamic moral order, we got no miracle. The fire symbolizes interrogation, surveillance, and imprisonment; nevertheless, it remains fire. It does not turn into justice and protection.

Unlike '*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*', which reveals the moral and ideological disappointment of the political struggle of the independence movement, '*Koyal aur General*' is even more directly focused on the state's authoritarian power by spectacle, discipline, and suppression of the opposition. The story begins with a military General who has been invited to a school event. At the event, he was given a full ceremonial welcome - a guard of honor, a bouquet of red roses, a marching band, and disciplined performances by schoolgirls. Amid the harmonized march-past performance, the storyline comes out that on the same day that the General has approved the order of severe punishments on young men and students adhering to leftist ideology. As the girls chant "Left, right! Left, right!" as they march past, the story changes to the picture of the prisoners being flogged and their "thick, dark blood" (Gazdar, 1980, p. 31) flowing like the red roses placed before the General. A series of synchronized performances in which the children are engaged are paralleled by orders issued by an army jeep breaking crowds — "Take arms and break the lines," and finally, "Fire!"— resulting in bodies writhing in the streets. (Gazdar, 1980, p. 31)

This juxtaposition of apparent decorum, decency and patriotism in the ceremonies of a school function with the flogging and shooting of dissenters reflects the paradox of the Zia era: a government that publicly talk about order, morality and patriotism was using violence to stamp out ideological dissent. By using the authority of the General and the chilling refrain of Left, right! and Fire! Gazdar turns the narrative into an allegory of the oppression of the Left and how the militarization of state power normalizes violence by infiltrating everyday space. The story clearly echoes the repression of progressive/ Left activists under the military regime. Using the technique of contrast, Saeeda Gazdar portrays scenes of celebration alongside repression, revealing the gap between official presentation and political reality.

Two distinct and yet interconnected perspectives on this climate of fear and ideological control are explored in '*Hindustani-Pakistani*' and '*Naya Qaida*': the former depicts the surveillance and disciplining of thought within academic spaces, and the latter reveals how aggressive state discourse seeps into everyday language, shaping the imagination of even children as they begin to absorb and reproduce the vocabulary of militarization in ordinary objects and expressions.

The short story '*Hindu-Pakistani*' (Gazdar, 1980, p. 179) contextualizes the personal experience of Ahmed and Najma within the historical and political changes happening in post-Partition Pakistan. The story begins with a meeting between Ahmed (the main character), a Pakistani man, and Najma, an Indian woman, after decades in London. They were both former students in pre-Partition India, the period when national identity was not divided officially. Their reunion is nostalgic and reflective: they remember a shared past of intellectual curiosity, openness, and an idealistic sense of justice. However, the political conditions of 1950s Pakistan now cast long shadows over their personal and professional lives.

As Ahmed moved to Pakistan, leaving behind Bombay as an Indian citizen is an example of these tensions that have arisen during the formation of a new state. He was provided with a teaching job at Karachi University and immediately fell victim to ideological policing. One of his colleagues criticizes the fact that he is using *Adaab* rather than *Salaam* and says that the traditional Indian greeting could not be used in a country that is predominantly Muslim. The contrast between their earlier identity as Indians and their later identities as Pakistani and Indian reflects the changing meanings attached to nationality after Partition. The seemingly minor conflict over Ahmad's use of '*Adaab*' versus '*Salaam*' reflects social pressures, as everyday language became a space where religious and national identities were being challenged and remade in terms of dominant understandings of religion and nationhood.

Ahmed's progressive vision as a teacher clashed with institutional and political conservatism. He insists on the development of the university library and the inclusion of different intellectual points of view, but the vice-chancellor branded his allusions to Karl Marx, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution as 'communist propaganda', framing alternative intellectual ideas as threats and not as valid knowledge. The narrative provided by Gazdar underlines the fact that educational establishments turned into surveillance and ideological pressure.

This same theme is reflected in a teachers' meeting that is outlined in the story: the president states, "The suppression of Leftist elements should begin right here." One of them also admits: Yes, this is very essential, so that these inclinations are not implanted and nurtured in society. The president responds, 'Students who hold such ideas should be closely monitored'. (Gazdar, 1980, p. 201) This scene demonstrates how the domination of ideas became the norm, where even neutral academic space was transformed into a place where everyone was expected to think the same.

In this story, Gazdar uncovers the paradox of the “Islamic Republic” and shows that religion is a tool of control employed to silence dissent. She demonstrates the institutionalization of extremism and narrow-mindedness in very educated people who readily internalize restrictive ideologies upon returning to Pakistan. The narrative underscores how institutional pressures and social expectations shape individual thought and behavior.

Ahmed's growing disappointment and ultimate decision to leave the country highlight the moral dimension of Gazdar's argument: independence and the prospect of a new nation do not necessarily end oppression. The systems of colonial domination may resurface as a part of something new and ideologically justified this time by the vocabulary of religion. The story anticipates recurring arguments in Pakistan regarding extremism, censorship, and intellectual freedom, proving Gazdar's foresight and political engagement through literature.

On the same note, in the story ‘Naya Qaida’ (New Textbook), a mother finds herself in a disturbing situation when she attempts to teach her four-year-old boy. The child replaces the familiar vocabulary traditionally linked to the alphabet in his primer with an unfamiliar and disturbing vocabulary, which leaves the mother shocked and concerned. According to the child, ‘*alif*’ does not mean *anar* (pomegranate) but America; ‘*Bay*’ does not mean *Bandar* (monkey) but *Bandoq* (Gun), ‘*Pay*’ *Phansi* (hanging); ‘*daal*’ means *Daako* (bandit) ‘*sheen*’ means *Shaheed* (martyr); and ‘*kaaf*’ mean *Kor’ray* (lashes). (Gazdar S. , 1986, pp. 114–118) These substitutions are not just a child’s troublesome word combinations; they also represent the fact that the language of violence and repression of the martial-law period became part of daily life.

Military rule was not solely the start of the consolidation of religious politics in Pakistan. It was during Z Bhutto’s later years that political survival became more about appeasing right-wing religious groups. To minimize resistance, he instigated such measures as the prohibition of alcohol, the introduction of Friday as the official holiday, and the banning of Western-style nightclubs. (Ahmad R. , 1991, p. 10.) Such concessions were a major political compromise, (Paracha, 2011) which entailed religious symbolism in state policy. Even though framed as a moral reform, it was through such legislative decisions that incorporated the fusion of politics and religion that created the ideological baseline that would later be intensified under the Islamization program of General Zia-ul-Haq.

In this regard, religion was not considered a spiritual system; rather, it was a system of governance and control. As Nawal El Saadawi, in her 1989 essay ‘Fundamentalism on the Rise’, puts it, fundamentalism

globally is “a political movement using God to justify injustices and discriminate between people, nations, classes, races, sexes, colours and creeds,” reducing the testimonial value of women. The story is written in a dialogic form, structured around a conversation between a husband and wife. The husband is a university professor who has been persecuted for telling the truth. The accusations against him involve opposition of the Islamic ideological state narrative, promotion of atheism, and corrupting the morals of the younger generation. He is also accused of propagating subversive thoughts and inciting his students to violent actions. These allegations made him even more isolated as his colleagues distanced themselves out of fear of similar persecution. This once popular and respected professor of the university has since been subjected to investigation just because he was telling the truth. This situation made him bitter and short-tempered. This environment of mistrust is further intensified by the end, where the professor mistrusts even his wife. Her response, “Don’t worry, my testimony would only count as half anyway” (Gazdar, 1986, p. 13) ironically exposes how legal discourse creates women as less credible subjects by diminishing their testimony. The irony of the wife's reply plays with the language of law as a critique of the social and institutional power which has found an excuse to justify inequity. The dialogue then links the individual, subjective experiences of mistrust to a broader conversation about legal and patriarchal authority.

Saeeda Gazdar’s opposition to the discriminatory application and implications of the Law of Evidence reflects her deep sense of political awareness and activism on women's issues, and she didn’t hesitate to say, “You ask for two, we ‘two crore’ of women shall testify against this tyranny and cruelty hurled at our heads in the name of the law of evidence.” (Ahmed, 1991, p. 177) These remarks make female testimony a call for collective resistance instead of exclusion.

‘*Adhi Gawahi*’, read in this backdrop, stands out as a calculated narrative intervention in the politics of credibility and justice and marks a conscious literary effort against a system built to reduce women’s voices. Through her literary and political activism, Saeeda turned this imposed ‘half testimony’ into a site of counter-authority. The very process of storytelling becomes an act of witnessing which challenges the state's role in enforcing institutionalized inequality.

In the Zia era, students, intellectuals, journalists, writers and other leftists were directly targeted. May 13, 1978, is considered a black day in the history of Pakistani journalism, when four journalists, Nasir Zaidi, Iqbal Jafri, Khawar Naeem Hashmi and Masoodullah Khan were sentenced in public to 15 lashes each. Pakistan

Times' journalist, Masoodullah Khan, also received the punishment of flogging, which was cancelled on health grounds. (Niazi, 1994, pp. 262-263) Saeeda Gazdar tries to represent newspapers and journalists' resistance role in Zia's authoritarian regime in her short story 'Warrant'.

The story is written as a dialogue between the police inspector and the son of a deceased journalist, 'Bukhari Sahib', who was the editor of a magazine, '*Bhalai* (Welfare)'. The inspector comes with a non-bailable arrest warrant for Bukhari Sahib and starts a strict search of his home. As the inspector was told that Bukhari Sahib was dead, he didn't believe it and continued his search. Saeeda shows the absurdity of this exercise when the search extends even to unusual places. Bukhari Sahib's son took the inspector to the graveyard to satisfy him. At last, unable to dispute the death of the journalist, he decides to pray in frustration. Although the inspector was shown the death certificate, he remains uncertain, to which Bukhari Sahib's son asks a question: why is it that his father is being treated like a criminal?

The inspector replies: "I do not find his name in the list of thieves, robbers, or local criminals that I have. But..." – after a pause, he adds - "Forgive me, I had to perform my duty. The orders for his arrest came from above, and one can never be sure how serious his crime might have been. It is possible that your father wrote something." (Gazdar, 1986, p. 191) The story makes it very clear that the state power under martial law was extremely abused to the extent that a dead man was not trusted completely. The main theme is that intellectuals and writers could be criminals just because they write. Gazdar employs heavy irony throughout the story. The inspector's official seriousness contrasts sharply with his irrational actions—searching a dead man's house and grave.

Gazdar's stylistic devices, such as irony and dialogue, reveal the rhetoric of authoritarian power, where there is no room for reason and even death does not dispel suspicion. The inspector's language makes writing itself a possible crime, demonstrating how the state treats intellectual expression as a threat. By presenting this logic as absurd, Gazdar creates a counter-discourse that questions the legitimacy of state power and its suppression of intellectual freedom.

With the above description of the political aspects of the resistance literature that Saeeda Gazdar wrote, her fiction further foreshadows the experiences of women under patriarchal and dictatorial regimes and depicts them as both passive and active advocates of dissent. The female protagonist of '*Dhara* (Flow)' – a story

based on a couple who are on a drive to explore Sindh - in any case, does have her share of political, social, and historical awareness, and she does not accept the glorification of military generals like Muhammad Bin Qasim,¹ but rather aligns herself with the values of freedom and human rights. (Gazdar, 1980, p. 94) '*Dhara*' critiques the discourse that keeps women out of political and historical conversation. By giving the female protagonist the ability to challenge existing historical accounts and refuse the glorification of military power, Saeeda creates women as active agents who make their own political and ethical decisions. The narrative thus relates gendered representations to wider themes of freedom and resistance.

Saeeda Gazdar's works extend the criticism of state-sponsored oppression to structural and domestic oppression affecting women in stories like '*Laali*', '*Badchalan*' (Woman of bad character), and '*Chadhawe Ki Chadar*'. In the short story '*Laali*', *Khato* (mother of *Laali*) opposes the forced marriage of *Laali*, emphasizing maternal bravery against patriarchy. (Gazdar, 1980, pp. 107-122) '*Badchalan*' investigates urban honor-based violence and the policing of women's mobility, depicting a working woman whose independence arouses the suspicion of her brother. (Gazdar, 1986, pp. 71-84) In '*Chadhawe Ki Chadar*', Gazdar deals with the issue of male infertility that often goes undiscussed, and women are held responsible for this. Rabia in '*Chadhawe Ki Chadar*' challenges the superstition and the subordination of women in marriage, denying both the rituals which she believes are tantamount to scapegoating women for infertility and asserting control over her life. (Gazdar, 1980, pp. 52-72) Social inequality and economic disparity leading to a distressing situation are effectively depicted in the short story '*Phanda*' (The Noose), in which a mother, out of poverty resulting from state neglect, kills her infant daughter. (Gazdar, 1986, pp. 121-140) In all these stories, Saeeda Gazdar deals with a range of topics all converging on an underlying central theme – resistance and outright defiance against systemic oppression and the state acting as an accomplice in perpetuating inequality and injustice.

After analyzing the progressive critique and narrative resistance of Gazdar against the military dictatorship and the ways in which her female characters express resistance, it is also of interest to examine how her literary and political contributions have been construed by the critics.

Literary critic Anwar Ahmed observes that the progressive movement discovered 'a new Rashid Jahan

1 The Umayyad general Muhammad bin Qasim (695–715) spearheaded the Arab invasion of Sindh in 711 CE, which signaled the start of Muslim political influence in the Indian subcontinent.

in Saeeda Gazdar' due to her incisive attack on the hypocrisy and misogyny of the Zia regime. (Ahmad A. , 2017, p. 241) Similarly, Nasir Abbas Nayyar notes that Gazdar recognized both the oppressor and the oppressed, consciously aligning herself with those subjected to injustice. To Nayyar, Gazdar's belief that all testimonies were implicitly in favor of one party and against another reflects her progressive ideology and her conscious decision to support the side that had fallen victim to injustice. (Nayyar, 2024)

This positioning is in continuity with the tradition of progressive women writers, who extended the domain of resistance literature. Fozia Rani stresses the relationship between Gazdar's fiction and the socio-political context in Pakistan, especially the depiction of women's struggles and sacrifices alongside men. (Rani, 2011, p. 365) Her writing also took on a distinctly feminist tone, as she began to see women as the first victims of religious and social oppression, and started to highlight the barriers that were placed upon women and their fight for dignity and agency.

To highlight the novelty and significance of Saeeda Gazdar's literary oeuvre I would cite an excerpt from literary critic and academic Razi Abdi [d.2025] in which he has lamented the inability of our litterateurs to document or narrate the impact of political developments on psyche of nation as well as individual and then then try to bring out the distinctive features of Gazdar's which presents a conspicuous departure from the trend. Razi Abdi wrote in '*Tessari Duniya ka Adab*,'

'What were the effects of the creation of Pakistan and its dismemberment on the psyche of this nation and the consciousness of its individual? These experiences have not become part of our literature. The litterateur has occasionally commented on them, but not in literature. When the Government of India Act 1935 was promulgated Manto wrote the short story on it— '*Naya Qanoon*' [New Constitution]. But in our country, constitutions have remained in vogue for three to four decades, but they have hardly been mentioned in the history of literature. The country further saw frequent imposition of martial laws, human rights violations like sentences of lashes, and public hangings in squares.... The journalists in their accounts have narrated these events. But nobody has contemplated their effects on our psyche... In our literature one finds a kind of terrifying

and restless silence on these developments. The literature here has not shown courage to confront this situation. (Abadi, 2019, p. 53)

If we compare the scenario Razi Abdi seems to lament with Gazdar's work, a contrasting picture emerges. I will confine myself to citing one instance from her short story '*Naya Qaida* (New Textbook)' in which she highlights the psychological impact of authoritarian and violent dispensations, such as Zia-ul-Haq's martial law regime, on children and society at large. I would assert that the novelty of her work lies not only in producing resistance literature under authoritarian rule when military control over the state had become a hegemonic project but also in documenting the difficult subject of the lived realities of people under oppressive martial law regimes, particularly under Zia-ul-Haq.

Conclusion

The article contends that Saeeda Gazdar's fiction is a clear and consistent manifestation of Pakistan's tradition of literary resistance, especially in the Zia-ul-Haq era. Her stories are not only about resistance to authority, but they are also a deeper challenge to state control, rigid ideology and the abuse of religion in politics. Saeeda Gazdar's works in Urdu fiction are equally significant but have not received the attention they deserve.

While the majority of writers responded to political repression either indirectly or mainly symbolically, Gazdar combines political criticism with the realities of ordinary life, particularly the lives of common people who suffer from censorship, surveillance, gender discrimination, and state violence. Like her poetry, her fictional works can constitute a building block for a project of constructing the 'social history' (Ahmed, 1991, p. 18) of Pakistan.

By examining Saeeda Gazdar's fiction in close detail, it can be seen that resistance is manifest not only in explicit political statements but also in the way everyday experiences are narrated. Her stories question authority, ideology, censorship, and the use of religion and nationalism as tools of social and political control. Through language, irony, symbolism, contrast, dialogue, and historical references, Gazdar reveals how authoritarian discourse infiltrates institutions, the home, personal relationships, and everyday thinking. The stories '*Aag Gulistan Na Bani*', '*Koyal aur General*', '*Warrant*', '*Tamgha*', '*Hindustani Pakistani*', '*Ādī Gawāhī*' and '*Naya Qaida*' reflect the fear, silence, uncertainty and marginalization suffered by intellectuals, students, women and other groups at the hands of the authoritarian regime. Her stories are characterized by emotional control that reinforces the effect of repression and fear in her fiction. Instead of

using oppositional slogans or speaking politically, Gazdar illustrates oppositional gestures in lived experience, memory, personal relationships, and questioning.

The study also shows how Gazdar's fiction creates a counter-discourse to official narratives, linking to broader histories of political and social oppression. Her work, therefore, extends knowledge of resistance literature in Pakistan, as she attempts to demonstrate that a female writer could challenge hegemonic political and patriarchal discourses through fiction. Gazdar should therefore be seen not simply as a mere commentator on current events but as an important contributor to the Urdu resistance literature, whose stories turn lived experiences into political consciousness and literary dissent.

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