

## Gender Construction and Women's Empowerment in Pakistani Society

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### Abstract

The status of women and girls in Pakistan – a Muslim-dominant populous, has remained lowest in the South Asia region in global indicators of gender equality and human development. Despite being almost half of the population of the country, women and girls are perceived as economically dependent on men, socially inferior, and restricted mainly to home domains. The debate on the construction of gender, feminism, and the plurality of sociocultural forces impinging on women's status is informed by the selected short stories of a male Pakistani author, Khalid Aftab, who wrote three books titled 'Jehan Ander Jehan (2014), 'Bhedi' (2018) and 'Potli' (2024). The study aims to examine Aftab's selected literary work from a feminist and gender perspective. The study examines the depiction and characterization of women and men, stereotyped sex-based gender roles, cultural and societal patterns to comprehend social and gender relations, and emerging challenges of women's agency and empowerment in homes and society, such as sexual abuse of minors, women's sexual exploitation, forced sex, including marital rape, child and forced marriages, workplace harassment, social exploitation, and influence of sociocultural environments. This study analyzes the concepts of gender, sex, masculinity, femininity, purdah, and virginity, which prevail in society, reassuring the readers of the depth of the study. It is concluded that Aftab's work, with its significant contribution, has significantly enriched the landscape of feminist literary creativity in Pakistan, profoundly impacting the understanding of gender roles and women's issues and enlightening the readers about the complexities of gender construction and women's empowerment in Pakistani society.

**Keywords:** femininity; masculinity; forced marriage; sexual exploitation; marital rape