



# **THE SUBJUGATED VOICE: FAMILIAL DISCRIMINATION, GENDER INEQUALITY, AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN *SARAH: THE SUPPRESSED ANGER OF THE PAKISTANI OBEDIENT DAUGHTER* (2015)**

**Ajaykumar Arvindbhai Panchal**

Research Scholar (SRF)

Department of English, School of Languages,  
Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India.

**Abstract:** Literature has always remained a fertile ground for authors to raise their voices against concerns that have troubled them for long. It allows the authors to express themselves creatively, enabling them to articulate their hostile experiences, emotions, and thoughts in a profound and meaningful manner. The graphic novel is an instrumental part of this literary arena and provides its authors and creators with an opportunity to express themselves more creatively with the use of its multimodal grammar that involves the aspects of the visual and the verbal. The subject of the present research is one such graphic novel wherein its author and creator is raising her voice against some of the concerns that supposedly consumed most of her early life. *Sarah: The Suppressed Anger of the Pakistani Obedient Daughter* (2015) is a graphic novel by Ayesha Tariq, a Pakistani creator, that conveys how its titular character, Sarah, was treated differently by her own family just because she was a girl. The feminist concerns raised in this graphic novel would constitute the core of the present research and the researcher will attempt a study to see how the grammar of the graphic novel is used to address feminist concerns in the present graphic novel.

**Index Terms:** Graphic Novel, Conservative Society, Feminist Concerns, Women, Gender Inequality, Gender Roles, Objectify

## **I. Introduction**

*Sarah: The Suppressed Anger of the Pakistani Obedient Daughter* is a debut graphic novel by Ayesha Tariq that was published in 2015. Ayesha Tariq had written and illustrated it in 2011 as part of her university thesis titled “The Suppressed Anger of the Pakistani Obedient Daughter” and got it published in 2015, but it was only when Zahra Salah Uddin, a Pakistani journalist, came across it at a Comics Convention in Pakistan and wrote an article about it that it reached a wider audience and attracted attention from countries like India. Kanishka Gupta, a prominent literary agent based in India who runs a literary agency by the name of Writer’s Side, took notice of this graphic novel and decided to get it published in India by Penguin Books in 2015. Thus, having been published by a reputed mainstream publisher like Penguin Books in India is a testament to its strong thematic and critical content. But the reason why she published her university thesis in the book

form lies with her family only. In one of her talks with Zahra Salah Uddin, she says, “The idea of this book came to me after a fight with my family” (Uddin “Are You an Obedient Pakistani Daughter”). Furthermore, how the graphic novel came into being is also a question that needs to be addressed here. Although originally it had been created as part of her university thesis, it was later converted into book form and published in 2015. The work is partly autobiographical and partly based on the lives of other women that Ayesha Tariq met and interviewed. In her own words, Sarah is a “collection of a lot of conversations I have had and also experiences I have had in my life. You could take Sarah as a metaphor for a lot of people. It can be anybody. It’s me. It’s the other women as well. . . .” (“An Obedient Daughter Talks Back in ‘Sarah’ Graphic Novel”). Furthermore, whether the work can be called a ‘graphic novel’ is possibly a subject of debate because of its short length. The work should be called a ‘graphic novella’ and not a ‘graphic novel’ because of its length of around seventy-odd pages, but since the author chooses to call it a ‘graphic novel’, likely because of the serious kind of subject matter that it deals with, the researcher would unproblematically refer to it as a ‘graphic novel’ in the present study.

*Sarah* is a story about a teenage, almost 18-year-old girl character of the same name who lives in urban Pakistan with her conservative family which includes a father, a mother and an elder brother. She has dreams in her eyes and wants to do everything in the world but, according to her, what is preventing her from thinking about and even going near to her dreams is her family. Her father is a retired army officer and is very strict, and her mother is a ‘worrier’ (not ‘warrior’ but ‘worrier’) because, in the words of Sarah, “She can’t stop caring about what other people think” (6). They live on the top floor of an apartment which has no elevator and their house is hot, small and impractical. They are also a typical Pakistani, South Asian family which keeps hosting big dinners for their guests and whose neighbours are an essential part of their lives. However, the central concern of the graphic novel is not the life of Sarah’s parents, where the family is living, or their relations with their neighbours but how Sarah feels in her own house. Her life is tangled because of the two identities that she carries with her: she is both a Pakistani and a girl. In her own words, “I am almost eighteen years old and I live in Pakistan. Living in Pakistan can be tough, especially if you’re a girl” (1). Thus, the present research would revolve around Sarah’s identity as a Pakistani girl and how these two identities—of being a Pakistani and a girl—shape the very world of the central character of Sarah. It is how she is treated in accordance with these identities that constitute the core of the present graphic novel and the present research.

## II. Familial Discrimination, Gender Inequality and Feminist Perspective in *Sarah* (2015)

The central concern of the present study is the character of Sarah who is treated differently and unequally in her own house. She is both a Pakistani and a girl, and it is these two identities that prevent her from doing what she wants. Pakistan is a very conservative society and being a girl in such a society is nothing short of a tragedy. Sarah dreams of travelling around the world, having romantic relationships, and having independence which would allow her to drive a car, wear the kind of clothes and do whatever she wishes to do but it is her family that comes in the way of her dreams and exercise a complete sway over her. She is forever cooking and cleaning in her family’s cramped apartment and is always under constant pressure from her family to protect her reputation and the way she looks for potential future husbands. Thus, for Sarah, her challenges begin from her own house only.

Ayesha Tariq’s *Sarah* highlights the gender inequality that lies at its very core. She has an elder brother who seemingly does nothing and yet is the apple of his parents’ eyes. Sarah, on the other hand, is studious, worries about her studies, and takes care of all the household chores and all the family members and yet what she is and does is overlooked by her family simply because she is a girl and she is meant to do it. In the very beginning when she is introducing the readers to her brother, her frustration is very much discernible when she says, “*Bhayya*. My brother . . . he’s an ass. He always gets things his way. It’s because he’s a boy . . . it’s a male-dominated society” (7). Her parents listen to her brother, attend to his wishes, and put him on a pedestal simply because he is a boy, which is in total contrast to how they treat Sarah. Sarah feels like a total alien in her own house. Her brother has his own vehicle which we get to know from the key that he is always spinning on his finger, and Sarah, on the other hand, is not even allowed to learn to drive because ‘women don’t drive’ is the answer women receive when they express their desire to learn driving. When Sarah asked her father if she could learn to drive, her father, without even looking at her, said, “Driving? There is no need. You’re not old enough anyway!” (15). One can even notice a stark difference in the personal space allotted to the two siblings in the same house. *Bhayya* “has the biggest room, the biggest high-tech writing table and exercise

machine that he doesn't use. Of course, he also has a queen-sized bed" (10). For Sarah's room, on the other hand, "there is a debate going on that maybe this [her room] should be the TV area and I should be moved to the servant quarter" (11). Thus, even the possibility of a discussion in the house about shifting Sarah to the servant's quarter suggests that she is nothing more than a servant in her own house, and this is very much evident in the back-breaking household chores that she constantly has to do. Thus, Ayesha Tariq has so poignantly highlighted the 'privileges' that the female members of the house are not entitled to and which most of the time are awarded to the male members of the house. Furthermore, there is a page in the graphic novel, as shown in fig. 1 here, that allows the readers to notice how the two siblings living in the same house are treated differently and unequally. It's a two-panelled page which delineates how *Bhayya* is treated by the parents in the first panel and Sarah in the other, both of which are set in different time frames. In the first panel, it's 12'o clock in the night when *Bhayya* comes to the drawing room to inform his parents about him going to a friend's house without even telling them why, and the parents permit him. The second panel is set in the daytime, at 4'o clock in the afternoon, when Sarah comes to the drawing room to ask her parents about going to her friend's house for project work, and surprisingly, the parents do not permit her even though it's daytime. They say "No need! Talk over the phone. It's almost time for Maghrib [fourth prayer of the day]. It's not right to step out" (32). Thus, by putting these two panels in close proximity with each other so that they can be compared and contrasted, Ayesha Tariq draws our attention to the gender inequality that is prevalent not only in the society outside but also within the four walls of one's house.

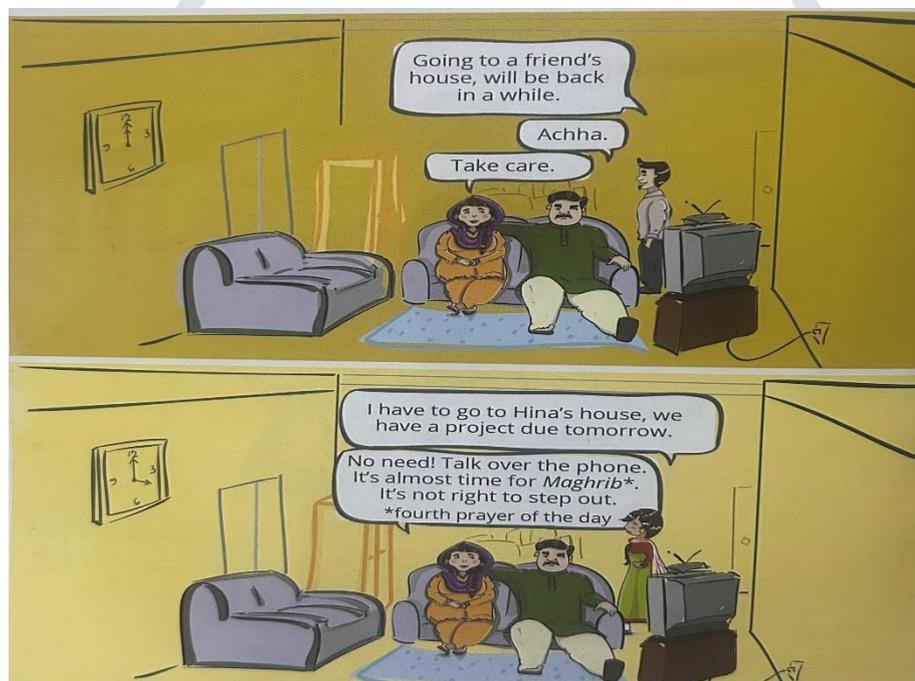


Fig. 1: Difference in treatment between two siblings

Also of equal importance is Ayesha Tariq's portrayal of how young women in modern conservative societies like that of Pakistan and other South Asian countries are objectified and expected to look in a certain way. Ayesha Tariq underscores that it is the priorities set by conservative societies that corrupt the lives of young women. Educating their daughters and making them financially independent is something that never occurs to them even in their dreams, and all they care for is to find a decent groom for their daughters and marry them off. In the case of Sarah, all her personal achievements are pushed into the margins of oblivion by her parents and the society around and her marriage is prioritized over anything else. In the words of Sarah, "We're raised to be brides here. Because of this shaadi business all the important things are made to sit on the sidelines and looks become the priority! I feel like a *Qurbani ka Bakra!*" (27). When Sarah won a trophy for winning a game of throwball and came excitedly to inform her mother about it, her mother responded by saying, "Tsk! Tsk! Look at how dark you've become! Bas, enough of your games! You've become so old anyway" (27). Sarah is also under the constant pressure of her family to take care of how she looks. When she was studying, her mother comes and tells her, "I always find you sitting and lazing around! Work on losing some weight. I ran into Auntie Shabnam the other day. She was commenting on how you've gained weight" (28). For her family, Sarah is nothing more than just a material for marriage. Her parents are so desperate to marry her off that her mother even invites, with the help of the Rishta Auntie, those candidates for marriage who are not even close to Sarah's age and are elderly people close to her parents' age as it seems from the

visuals. Furthermore, Sarah is expected to adhere to strict dress codes—she cannot wear jeans and other Western clothes—that emphasizes modesty and chastity, has no agency over her life and body, her educational and economic opportunities are severed and faces restrictions on her mobility and freedom. Thus, at a time when the world is progressing and society is marching ahead by leaps and bounds in the digital age of the 21st century, certain societies of the subcontinent are stuck at not allowing their daughters their due freedom and keeping them chained in their houses, and this is something that worries the author the most in the graphic novel.

Another of the most important aspects of the graphic novel is Ayesha Tariq's commentary on the notions of gender roles. As mentioned earlier, Sarah spends most of her day cooking and cleaning in the house. She has dreams in her eyes, she wants to become something by herself and therefore she wants to study hard so that she can make her dreams a reality but what is preventing her from doing all of this is the gender roles that have been imposed on her by her family and the society at large. She always has a mountain of dishes to clean before her and is never really allowed the time for her study. She is always in the kitchen making something or the other for the family or for the guests who have come over, and consequently, she never really gets time to work on herself and toward her dreams. Her life becomes hell on the days of Eid celebrations when a lot of relatives and guests come over to her house for dinner and it is Sarah only who has to do all the cooking and the cleaning. A double-spread that one encounters on pages 46 and 47, as shown in fig. 2 here, perfectly delineates, rather visually, how Sarah's day is spent on the day of Eid celebration. The double-spread is set in the dining hall of the house wherein the Eid celebrations took place and the visuals depict the after-party scenes of the celebration. Two groups of people are gossiping and having fun while there is a big dining table in the middle of one half of the double-spread. On the dining table are the leftover dishes and foods and Sarah is the only person working there to fix things and clean the dining hall and the house. However, it is the multiple working figures of Sarah at the dining table that draw our attention. There are three simultaneously working figures of Sarah doing cleaning chores around the dining table: cleaning the floor, picking up the leftover dishes and food, and serving cold drinks to the guests who are gossiping. Through such a depiction, Ayesha Tariq is drawing our attention to the never-ending household chores that women, young women particularly, have to do, and because of this, they never really get the time to work towards their goals and dreams. The author is questioning the imposition of certain gender roles on the shoulders of young women which has happened since ages. But Sarah never really let her frustrations come out as it is suggested in the title.



Fig. 2: Multiple figures of Sarah doing household chores

So far, the researcher has tried to explore the world of Sarah by using the lens of gender inequality, gender roles, and women objectification. However, the most important aspect of the graphic novel is Ayesha Tariq's brave and subtle portrayal of a taboo subject that most young women are not comfortable talking about: the issue of sexual abuse. A surprising and unexpected addition to the graphic novel, Sarah has a *khaaloo*, a maternal uncle, who has come over to her house for Eid celebrations. As part of the celebration, he gives Eidi to Sarah but Sarah doesn't want to see him and prays silently for not being noticed by him. However, when he finds her, Sarah tells the readers why she avoids her *khaaloo*. Sarah avoids *khaaloo* for reasons most of the young women are not comfortable talking about. The *khaaloo*, whenever he meets her, squeezes her cheeks, does lingering handshakes, weirdly rubs her back in a circular motion as if feeling her back with his hands, and squeezes her arms as if feeling them, and these 'inappropriate' touches make her feel very uncomfortable. Additionally, what draws the attention of readers is what Sarah says besides these four kinds of touches. She says that in addition to the cheek squeeze, the handshake, the weird back rub, and the arm squeeze, there are "... others that I will not mention" (49), throwing light upon many other possible instances of such 'weird' and 'inappropriate' ways in which her *khaaloo* must have touched her in the past. But what is even more surprising is that whenever Sarah complained to her mother about *khaaloo* doing this to her, her mother denied it by trying to provide an alternative explanation to it. She says, "One should not say things like that! He loves you. This is how he expressed his love!" (56), to which Sarah silently says, "Yes. Perhaps a little too much" (57). Thus, by bravely talking about the sexual abuse of young daughters at the hands of their close relatives, Ayesha Tariq breaks open the gate for many other young women of the subcontinent who might have been abused by their close relatives to open up about what happened to them and bravely confront it. In one of her interviews, when she was asked about why she included the character of this sleazy uncle in the graphic novel, Ayesha Tariq responded,

"There are a lot of conversations that we're very uncomfortable with having. And often times nobody wants to be the first one to have a conversation [about this]. I like to think of the book as an ice breaker so that people can now continue with those conversations because it did happen that when I wrote about this sleazy uncle, this sleazy *khaaloo*, a lot of people who read it were very happy and told me that you did this for us" ("An Obedient Daughter Talks Back in 'Sarah' Graphic Novel").

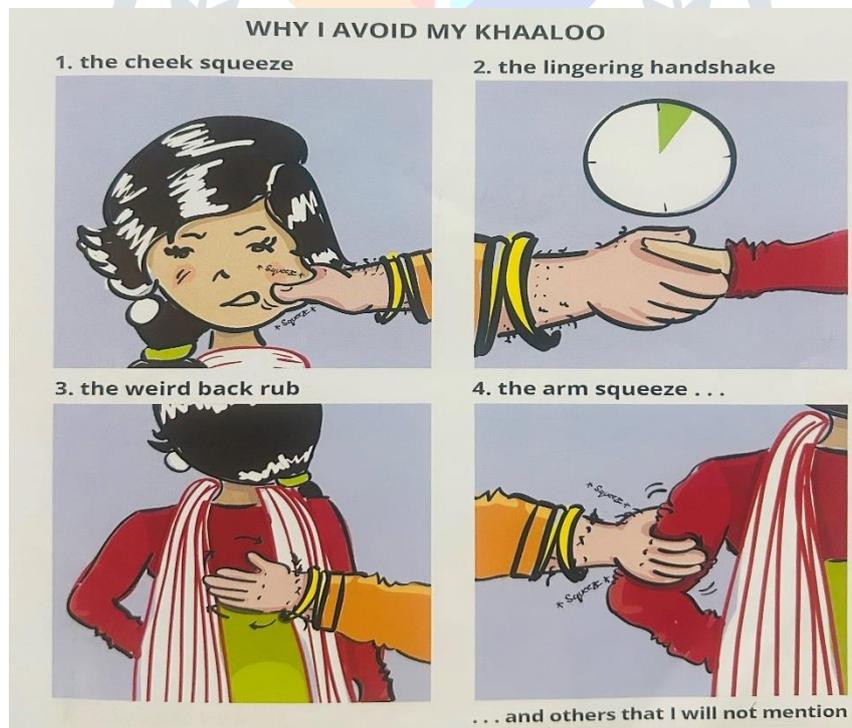


Fig. 3: *Khaaloo's inappropriate touches 1*

Thus, Ayesha Tariq bravely brings in the issue of sexual abuse and tells the world that these young women do understand what is happening to them and that the world doesn't get to know about sexually perverted characters like *khaaloo* because these young women choose not to speak and often their complaints are overturned by their family members like Sarah's mother. She says, "The sleazy *khaaloo* is a metaphor for

camouflaged sexual abusers, something that is difficult to tell let alone address it” (qtd. in DHNS). Taking to DNA about her graphic novel, Ayesha says,

I wanted the book to be relatable. I wanted the readers to know that I know these issues exist in their lives. Exploring these deeply embedded issues would have involved people getting uncomfortable. Some people tend to completely close themselves about these. The book is meant for people to start talking. . . . it’s a first step. I’m not here to start a movement. But people have to be comfortable talking about things that they know exist and are unfair. (qtd. in H., Sara).

Now, coming to Ayesha Tariq’s use of the visual metaphor in the graphic novel, she uses the metaphor of a glass bottle with a stopper that is filled with the weight of Sarah’s anger and frustration. It signifies that Sarah has suppressed her anger and frustrations. Her use of this metaphor is very nuanced. Every time she feels angry about her being treated differently and unequally in her own house, she bottles up her anger and frustration and does not speak them out. As the story progresses, we see that the bottle that was empty in the beginning slowly begins to fill with the words of her anger and frustration. The bottle contains words like “Why should I or you care about what other people think?”, “Your rules are really stupid . . .”, “Why can’t you treat us equally? We’re both your kids, right”, “Ullu ka patha”, “What about my priorities”, “I have work of my own too you know. Who do you expect to give my exams”, “I hate this”, “I am sick and tired of this” and many others. But when her anger is at its peak and the bottle becomes full of her frustrations and the words are coming out of it, she closes the bottle with a stopper instead of letting her anger come out and puts it in a place which, metaphorically, contains numerous other such bottles and her bottled up anger and frustrations. The bottles which were already there contained words like “I am equal”, “I will cut my hair”, “I wish I could move out of this prison cell”, “I will break the hand of next guy who touches me inappropriately”, “Keep your hands to yourself”, “Why do you act like I don’t even exist”, “So when will the time come when you start respecting me?”, “So unfair” and numerous others. Thus, Ayesha Tariq’s use of the visual metaphor of stoppered glass bottles conveys Sarah’s sense of anger and frustration so effectively. In the words of Shreya Ila Anasuya, “This bottle steadily fills with the weight of unsaid words through the course of the book. The title, spilling over with words, is heavy with this weight” (Anasuya). In the words of Tariq herself, “The glass bottle is used throughout the book as a metaphor for anger that is suppressed on a daily basis” (qtd. in PTI).

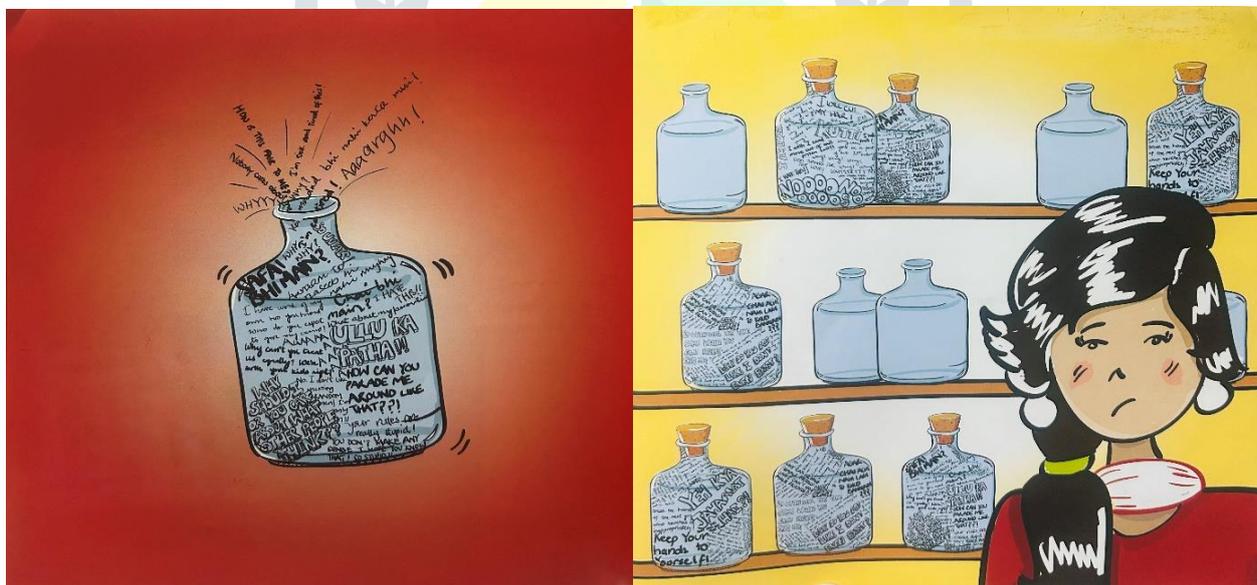


Fig. 4: Stopped glass bottles filled with Sarah’s suppressed anger and frustrations

*Sarah* is not just the story of its central character but also about all the women of all ages who live in the subcontinent and beyond. To put it in her own words, “This book stemmed from a lot of anger that I felt and I started making a list of things that all my female friends and I went through. I realised with time that this book wasn’t just an account of my life, I was speaking up for a lot of women in Pakistan. . . . Sarah could be any of us, any of us could be Sarah” (qtd. in Uddin). The borderless panels of the graphic novel also invite an inquiry into them. By not creating borders around its panels, the graphic novel extends the visual metaphor of

the ordeal to the society at large signifying that the ordeal is not only limited to the character of Sarah but to all the other Sarahs in the subcontinent and beyond who feel the same way.

### III. Conclusion

Ayesha Tariq's *Sarah: The Suppressed Anger of the Pakistani Obedient Daughter* (2015) is a very nuanced graphic novel that, although short in length, touches upon some of the most important feminist concerns of the modern time, especially prevalent in the subcontinent. Its subtle delineation of what young women go through in a conservative setting is a testament to its everlasting appeal. Furthermore, Ayesha Tariq has so vividly detailed the everyday life ordeal that a young woman has to undergo in a conservative setting but the larger message of the graphic novel is that for a woman who is living in a conservative family, her challenges begin from her house itself. In the words of Shreya Ila Anasuya, "Sarah's story is an important reminder that it is not just public spaces that need to be taken back against gender-based discrimination – it is all spaces, including and especially those in the home and in the mind" (Anasuya). Thus, Sarah is a short but vivid account of the lives of young women in the subcontinent who live in conservative families.

### REFERENCES:

- [1] "An Obedient Daughter Talks Back in 'Sarah' Graphic Novel." *CBC Radio*, 12 Mar. 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/schedule-for-friday-march-11-2016-1.3486649/an-obedient-daughter-talks-back-in-sarah-graphic-novel-1.3486668>. Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.
- [2] Anasuya, Shreya Ila. "A Bottle Full of Unsaid Things: A New Visual Story from Pakistan." *Scroll.in*, 2 Jan. 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/801206/a-bottle-full-of-unsaid-things-a-new-visual-story-from-pakistan>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.
- [3] DHNS. "Outburst of Suppressed Emotions." *Deccan Herald*, 5 Feb. 2016, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/karnataka/bengaluru/outburst-suppressed-emotions-2047161>. Accessed 11 Jan. 2024.
- [4] H., Sara. "Pakistani Graphic Novel Captures the Frustrations of Being An Obedient Daughter." *Homegrown*, 8 June 2021, <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-explore/pakistani-graphic-novel-captures-the-frustrations-of-being-an-obedient-daughter>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2024.
- [5] PTI. "Pakistan's Obedient Daughters: Nice, Calm But Never Angry." *The Indian Express*, 4 Sept. 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/pakistans-obedient-daughters-nice-calm-but-never-angry-3012757/>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2024.
- [6] Tariq, Ayesha. *Sarah: The Suppressed Anger of the Pakistani Obedient Daughter*. Penguin India, 2015.
- [7] Uddin, Zahra Salah. "Are You an 'Obedient' Pakistani Daughter? This Novel Asks Why." *DAWN*, 9 Mar. 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1167986>. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.