Discourse of Sindhi Nationalism in Shah's *A Season for Martyrs*: A New Historicist Perspective

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Abstract

Shah's historical novel, A Season for Martyrs (2014), is a representation of Sindhi culture, identity and its history. Set in contemporary and (anti)colonial Sindh, the novel interweaves past and present, fact and fiction, and myth and history. It depicts the story of the personal and political identity of a young Sindhi media journalist, Ali Sikandar, in today's Sindh, while in parallel it also presents episodes from personal and political lives of some notable Sindhis (or related to Sindh) from the history. This research paper attempts a textual analysis of A Season for Martyrs (2014) drawing upon theoretical concepts of new historicism. Greenblatt's theory of new historicism (1980), as a critical practice, seeks to reconnect a literary work with the time it was produced and identifies it with the cultural and political discourse(s) of the time. New historicism denies the traditional privilege of literature over history as it sees literary and non-literary texts as a product of a culture wherein both influence and shape each other. The paper attempts to study the social and political context of the novel and at the same time the textual nature of the history presented in the text. In particular, it explores the representation of discourse of martyrdom about Zulifqar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, and representation of G. M. Syed's nationalist discourse. The study argues that through the fictional representation of Sindh's culture and history, Shah, along with the journey of political identification of the young generation of Sindhis, asserts a case for a moderate Sindh nationalism in contemporary Pakistan.

Keywords: Discourse, Sindhi Naionalism, New Historicism

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1. Introduction

Bina Shah is a Pakistani novelist, columnist, committed feminist and women rights activist. Born in Karachi in 1972, she belongs to a Sindhi landowning Syed family. Raised and educated in Karachi and Virginia, the USA, she has published five novels and two short story collections. *A Season for Martyrs* is Shah's fourth novel, first published in the Italian language in 2010. The English version was published in 2014 as one of the most prominent English language novels focusing on Sindh, its people, culture and Sindhi society. Hussain nicknamed it, "The Great Sindhi Novel" (Shah, 2014, p. 279). The novel entwines myth, legend and history of Sindh's mystical and (anti)colonial past set against the political events in contemporary Pakistan. The contemporary story opens in Karachi spanning a little over two months starting with Benazir Bhutto's homecoming after exile in October 2007 until her assassination at an election rally in Rawalpindi on 27th December 2007. Alongside the contemporary storyline, the novel contains parallel chapters on historical figures from or related to Sindh such as Shaheed Benazir Bhutto, Pir Pagaro, Zulifqar Ali Bhutto, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, *Hazrat* Khawaja Khizr, G. M. Syed and others. The chapters on historical figures are based on some interesting anecdotal episodes from history in the lives of these personalities. The contemporary narrative recounts the story of Ali Sikandar, an aspiring young Sindhi who is the son of a pro-Bhutto Sindhi landlord. Unsatisfied with his job at a news channel and estranged from his feudal father, he is planning to move to the USA for studies and wants to marry his forbidden Hindu girlfriend Sunita. While covering Benazir Bhutto's homecoming rally for his channel, Ali loses a colleague in the tragic bomb explosion targeting the hundreds of thousands of people and supporters gathered to welcome the popular leader. Caught in a familial and national identity crisis, he resigns from his job to join the People's Resistance Movement – a civil society group opposing General Musharaf's government for the imposition of constitutional emergency and curbs on the judiciary and media. The novel culminates with the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto and Ali Sikandar uncovering his political identification after having fallen for the charisma of Benazir Bhutto.

2. Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, *A Season for Martyrs* interweaves history, legend and fiction as Bina Shah also shares that while writing this historical fiction she

felt "somewhere halfway between a dream and a long hallucination into the past" (Shah, 2014, p. 279). Clements (2014) maintains that Shah's ambitious novel is a notable contribution in a cultural project aimed at understanding the relationship of Sindhi icon Benazir Bhutto with the land of Sindh, its people and her nation at large. Clements notes that written in the backdrop of mystic, feudal, and anti-colonial Sindh, the novel tells the contemporary story of Sindhi youth from political alienation towards national identification. Clements also underscores Shah's interweaving of fact with fiction, history with a personal anecdote, and myth with legend.

Liddle (2016) reiterates Clements' (2014) view that in the novel binaries of fact and fiction, personal and the political, and Sindhi land with her people are bonded by the common threads of martyrdom, Sindh and Shah Latif's poetry. The compelling story of Ali and historical episodes set across centuries present a vivid picture of Sindh and its people.

Similarly, Shamsie (2017) notes that the novel tells an 'unusual' history of the author's land and society. Shah earns Shmasie's praise for expanding her canvas and for the marked development in her art to produce a historical novel that has "a narrative complexity, structured with great care" (p. 431).

Malik (2021) in his doctoral thesis presents a parallel reading of *A Season for Martyrs* along with three other Pakistani English novels to argue that Pakistani women writers reconceptualize the nation's history to rewrite an inclusive and people-oriented history. Malik's new historicist reading of the novel discusses the representation of discourse of martyrdom, Sufism, honour and Sindhi identity. In a similar study, Syed and Shahriar (2019) present a new historicist analysis of the novel. The study discusses discourse of mysticism, honour, nationalism and historical facts in the novel in relation to the historical discourses. Further, it discusses the political and social discourse presented in the novel in the context of the author and her historical situation.

The brief review of the existing studies shows that the existing studies focus on the representation of the history of Sindh. As the novel portrays political figures as well, therefore, it is pertinent to explore the representation of Sindhi political identity and nationalism in relation to the cultural and political context.

3. Theoretical Framework

New historicism can be defined as "a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period" (Barry, 1995, p. 166). It denies the traditional privilege of the literary texts over non-literary texts. Instead of a literary foreground and a historical background, this mode of study envisages and practises equal weight to literary and non-literary texts, and sees them as constantly informing and interrogating each other. Montrose (1989) defines it as a combined interest in "the textuality of history, and historicity of texts" (p. 30). Tyson (1998) summarises the key concepts of new historicism which can be summed up as following:

i. History, rather than facts, is an interpretation of the events that happened in the past. Hence, it denies history's claim to truth, and takes all historical accounts as narratives, like other narratives. For this reason, all historical analysis is inevitably subjective.
ii. A monolithic or unified spirit in history does not exist, nor there can be a reasonable totalizing explanation of history. Rather, there is an unstable and dynamic interplay among various discourses which historians attempt to analyse.
iii. Power is not limited to a single person or a single level of society. It circulates in a culture through exchanges of material goods and human beings, and through the exchange of ideas by way of various discourses a culture produces.
iv. Personal identity is shaped by the culture and at the same time shapes the culture it emerges in.

These key concepts of new historicism are keys concerns in literary analysis and literary research. In a new historicist analysis, usually parallel reading of literature is attempted with a focus on the textual nature of reality, the notion operations of power, and the representation of the marginalised

groups. Barry (1995) sums up that the new historicists generally do the following:

i. They study the literary texts in juxtaposition to non-literary texts.
ii. They detach a literary text from the previously available criticism to defamiliarise it to see it as if new.
iii. Their focus of attention is on the issues of state power and how it is sustained, on the perpetuation of patriarchal structures, and the process of colonization.
iv. In practice, they use Derrida's notion of the textual nature of every facet of reality and Foucault's idea of 'discursive practices'.

This study employs new historicism as a conceptual framework. It examines how the discourse of the novel in juxtaposition to non-literary texts presents the discourse of Sindhi nationalism and martyrdom with reference to the political figures of Benazir Bhutto, Zulifqar Ali Bhutto and G. M. Syed. It argues how the fictional representation of Sindhi political figures is influenced by the historical discourse yet it shapes the political discourse of the time.

4. The Socio-political Context of the Novel

A Season for Martyrs (2014) is a historical novel depicting the search for the identity of a young Sindhi man in contemporary urban Pakistan. In contrast to a contemporary plot, the novel also presents parallel chapters from the past portraying the rich cultural and political history of Sindh. The common theme of martyrdom binds the plot of the novel as well as the present with the past. The socio-political context shaping the discourse of the novel is marked by Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007 purportedly by *Al-Qaeda* and *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan. After 9/11, when Pakistan joined as a strategic ally of the US in the war against terror, an unprecedented wave of violence struck the nation in the shape of terror attacks. The Islamist militants frustrated over the Pakistani government's shift in strategic and foreign policy, created a havoc by frequent gun, bomb, and suicide attacks on civilians and security forces alike. According to Jalal (2014) "[b]etween 2003

and 2010, more than 30000 terror-related casualties were reported…" (p. 363). The explosive surge in violence was a case of the backfire of radicalization of Pakistani society in the name of religion during General Zia's regime when Islamic Jihad was used as a strategic tool for political and material gains against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. In this context, Jalal (2014) discusses how the people of Pakistan, in a state of insecurity were "pondering the reasons for their country's perilous condition and seeking a reprieve from violence and insecurity" (p. 06). This finds expression in "a robust and thriving popular culture, whose artistic, literary, and musical productions have both a local and a transnational appeal" (Jalal, 2014, p. 06). Therefore, Shah's novel could be taken as a creative and cultural response by a Sindhi Pakistani author. In this context, when Pakistan's policymakers were entangled in the challenge of fighting the existential threat from the radical Islamist militants without harming the state's Islamic ideology as a foundational principle of the state, Shah's discourse of Sufi Islam and centuries-old rich cultural and political legacy of Sindh makes sense. To put it in different words, Shah is re-imagining the history of Pakistan from the Sindhi perspective. She contends a case for Sindh by underscoring the contributions of Sufi saints and political heroes and martyrs of Sindh. In the backdrop of Sindh's diverse past, the author makes a case for fighting militancy and violence with Sufi Islam and cultural diversity. Lastly, Shah also portrays how the educated young Sindhis are trying to make a sense of their Sindhi identity concerning their national/Pakistani identity. And how they are making efforts to achieve a peaceful and progressive Pakistan.

A Season for Martyrs is part of a moderate version of Sindhi nationalist discourse. G. M. Syed, one of the most prominent Sindh nationalists, after his disillusionment with the independent state, rejected the official narrative of Pakistani nationhood based on Islamic ideology in the favor of *Sindu Desh,* an independent Sindhi state. In his books, *Heenyar Pakistan Khey Tuttan Khappey* (Now Pakistan Should Disintegrate) (1972) and, A Nation in Chains – *Sindhu Desh* (1974), he put forward a case for independent Sindh claiming Sindh's identity as a separate nation based on cultural, geographical and historical grounds. However, Shah's subtle silence on Syed's narrative of Sindhi nationalism, suggests her view of Sindhi nationalism is more balanced as it conjoins Sindh's rich cultural and political legacy with the Pakistani nationhood. Shah, in her representation of Sindhi culture and

nationalism, also deconstructs it by underscoring its shortcomings and failings. Shah's novel is an attempt to fill in the existing gap in Pakistani Anglophone fiction regarding the representation of Sindh. *A Season for Martyrs* puts a strong case of Sindh as a significant yet distinct part of the postcolonial nation-state with its own distinctive identity usually ignored or undermined in the monolithic official national identity of Pakistan. Hence, the novel generates a discourse arguing for a more equitable representation of Sindh, and its culture and history in the official national identity.

Shah asserts authority to represent the culture and history of Sindh as she is a Sindhi Syed claiming to be a decedent of one of the most esteemed Sufi poets, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, of Sindh. In a candid revelation, she recalls that to write the novel under discussion, she "had to fall into a trancelike state, somewhere halfway between a dream and a long hallucination into the past of this beautiful province" (Shah, 2014, p. 279). This shows the author's subjective engagement in shaping the discourse of the book. The author acknowledges several historical and non-literary sources that she took help from to write the novel. This fact supports the new historicist view about a literary work that is shaped by its context but simultaneously also influences the very discourses (context) of which it is a product.

4.1 Representation of Political History of Sindh: A Discourse of Martyrdom and Sindhi Nationalism

Death to those who say you're dead
Martyrs don't die
They live forever […]
We are the descendants of martyrs
And the descendants of saints
Descendants of Shah Latif!
[…] We have in our veins
The Blood of Makhdoom Bilawal
The blood of Bhutto
The blood of Benazir
(Mahessar, 2008)

The discourse of martyrdom is deep-rooted in the consciousness of the Sindhi people and Sindhi society. Above lines from a poetic tribute to Benazir Bhutto and other Sindhi martyrs and their connection with the Sindhi people is a glimpse of the prevalence of discourse of martyrdom in Sindh. Like Mahesar (2008), *A Season of Martyrs*, despite its fragmented structure and parallel plots, is connected through the common thread of martyrdom. Among the fictional representation of many martyrs include Zulifqar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, *Pir Pagaro* the sixth, *Hur* fighters, and more than a hundred people killed in the Karsaz Bomb blast in Benazir's homecoming rally in Karachi. Bina Shah has portrayed the duo of father and daughter Bhuttos as political martyrs having played pivotal roles in national and regional politics, though both fell victims to tragic ends.

4.2 Zulifqar Ali Bhutto

In Pakistan, Bhutto family from Larkana, Sindh leads the legacy of political martyrs. Zulifqar Ali Bhutto (ZAB) to date remains one of the most influential and popular political leaders of Sindh and Pakistan for initiating a culture of popular politics by his passionate and fiery speeches at public gatherings. He mobilized the masses with the still popular slogan of *roti, kapra and makan* (food, clothing, and housing), the three basic needs for livelihood. As Jalal (2014) notes that Bhutto enshrined the buzzword of social justice as a motto in his political party: "Islam is our faith, democracy is our polity, socialism is our economy, all power to the people." (p. 181).

Jalal (2014) describes Bhutto as a "self-styled populist" (p. 177), a western educated Sindhi landlord who followed a liberal lifestyle. He willingly accepted "the crown of thorns offered to him by the new power brokers of the military establishment" (p. 181). She further describes that an impassioned Bhutto in his first speech to the nation as a prime minister, claimed to be "the authentic voice of the people of Pakistan" (p. 179). He avowed that he had been "summoned by the nation" at a critical hour, when "we are at the edge of the precipice" (p. 179). Thus once in power, Bhutto appealed to the popular sentiment and asserted his disassociation with the ruling elite, the bureaucracy, and the military establishment.

In in the novel, Shah presents the personal and political history of the Bhutto through the perspective of Ali Sikandar, a Sindhi landlord and a staunch

supporter of the Bhutto and PPP, the Bhutto's political party. The narrator criticises General Zia and terms ZAB as the son of the nation and a symbol of freedom for the masses.

> The entire country was in mourning, as much for their lost son as for their lost freedom; the madman General Zia had stolen from them the idea that ordinary men could have a voice in the destiny of their nation, and murdered its messenger. (Shah, 2014, p. 194)

Like Jalal (2014), Shah portrays Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto as a metaphor for freedom, people's voice, and the son of the nation. Contrastingly, the military generals are depicted as "petty men" and "tinpot generals" (Shah, 2014, p. 195). Unlike the military generals, ZAB is depicted as "tall and handsome" and "full of charisma" (Shah, 2014, p. 202). He was a popular leader who had the power to enthrall the masses with his rhetorical power. He would use his passionate sloganeering to charge the crowds: "Islam is our faith, democracy is our policy, socialism is our economy. Power to the people!" (Shah, 2014, p. 202). As a witness to ZAB's powerful rhetoric to charge a huge crowd, Ali Sikandar felt it was like the beginning of a revolution.

Shah (2014) has depicted the political history of ZAB as a highly educated and politically groomed Sindhi politician who "rose to power like a comet streaking through the sky, a tail of brilliance and accomplishment stretching out far behind him" (p. 198). At the age of thirty, he was the youngest member of General Ayub's cabinet. The General was so impressed by the young ZAB that he appointed him foreign minister of Pakistan. He successfully negotiated the Indus Water Treaty and a peace treaty (The Tashkent Declaration) with India that resolved the war of 1965. Two years later, after parting ways with President Ayub, he traveled across the country to mobilize the masses by delivering political speeches. His message of power to people made him so popular that he founded his own political party, Pakistan People's Party in 1967. ZAB's party won a huge number of seats in the parliament in the general elections of 1970. However, the Bengali

leader Sheikh Mujib from East Pakistan was not allowed to become the prime minister of Pakistan despite winning the majority seats in East Pakistan. The political crisis culminated in the 1971 civil war that resulted in the disintegration of united Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. After Pakistan lost the war, General Yahya resigned and transferred power to ZAB. Ironically, the tragedy of the nation, in one way, became an opportunity for ZAB and a reason to celebrate for the people of Sindh: "…while the rest of Pakistan mourned, all of Sindh was enthralled with the ascent of a fellow son of the soil to the most powerful position in Pakistan" (Shah, 2014, p. 204-5). This shows how regional and ethnic identities take precedence over a national identity lacking plurality.

Alongside the charisma of Bhutto as a popular politician, Shah (2014) also highlights his political weaknesses and failures to deconstruct the popular myth of Bhutto. His negotiation of the treaties is criticised as being more favorable to India. As a landlord, Sikandar could understand well that under the Indus Water Treaty, Eastern waters that now belonged to India were more powerful than the western ones, which now belonged to Pakistan. Similarly, the narrator criticises that the Shimla agreement, the peace treaty after the 1971 war, negotiated by ZAB with Indra Gandhi, the Indian PM, was so favorable to India that "the [Indian] prime minster died of –happiness" (p. 2010). Moreover, Bhutto was partly responsible, along with Sheikh Mujib and Pakistan's military establishment in the debacle of disintegration of Pakistan in 1971 as the political and military stakeholders failed to reach a political solution to the political crisis. Bhutto's agenda of land reforms also failed. The clever feudals dodged government restrictions on the size of land-holding as they subdivided the family's vast lands into the names of their family members and anonymous holders, *Khatedars*. This is how the Sindhi landlords failed Bhutto's socialistic progressive agenda.

After Bhutto's hanging, to console the dejected Benazir, Sikandar Ali mythologises Zulifqar Ali Bhutto to share something cherishing about his charismatic leader. He recounts that during the trial when ZAB was brought into the court, he was weak and in low spirits. In the court, he called out for help to great Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and then miraculously, "[t]he whole room began to grow bright, and your father's face was illuminated as if the light of God was shining on his face. And then he regained his strength,

and he was able to speak, and he spoke eloquently, for four days after that" (Shah, 2014, p. 215). Ironically, Sikandar had never witnessed Bhutto's trial but he reported someone else's account as a first-hand account. Like many other similar accounts and myths creating a mystery about Bhutto's death, Sikandar's account would also pass into a legend. People heard stories that how "Bhutto had not been hanged, but beaten to death, that he was a living saint, a martyr, and that martyrs never died" (Shah, 2014, p. 216). However, for Sindhi people, the truth was stranger than fiction as they took delight in turning their heroes into myths and legends. Shah contends that Bhutto was like more than an individual, a metaphor for the people of Sindh. The day Bhutto was hanged in Rawalpindi, it was not just him but it was the whole of the Sindh that had been put under trial and hanged. Therefore, Sikandar's spiritual presence mattered more than his physical presence, like other Sindhis who felt and experienced Bhutto's 'execution' spiritually rather than physically.

The poor and disenfranchised people of Sindh to whom Bhutto had wanted to give basic rights, equality and justice would offer prayers for their executed leader and worship him as a martyr: "He would be transformed from a man into a living saint. This, too, was the way of Sindh, and it would never change" (Shah, 2014, p. 209-10). Like the people of Sindh, Bhutto's personality is also mythologized by the author when his tragic end is compared with the Greek mythical hero Icarus who always dreamt to be able to fly like a bird. He made himself wings of wax and glued them to his shoulders. But when he flew too close to the sun, the heat of the sun melted his wings and he dropped straight to earth and died. Bhutto had high dreams for his nation but met a similar fate. The narrator puts forward a pertinent question: "Had God punished him for forgetting that he was only a mortal?" (Shah, 2014, p. 209). Arguably, Bhutto was punished by the military establishment and the international powers, for he had transgressed his limits despite being a Sindhi civilian politician. Shah's argument is in line with history as Jalal (2014) also refers to how the elder Bhutto was to become a mythical figure, "the tragic hero of whom epics are told" (p. 180). Like a

dramatic tragic hero he also "made an irreparable error of judgment" (Jalal, 2014, p. 215) when he appointed General Zia-ul-Haq, a much junior General, as the army chief. Later, he became the victim of real power brokers in Pakistan: the military establishment and the United States of America. Bhutto himself blamed General Zia and Superpower America for bringing down his government and his judicial execution (Jalal, 2014).

4.3 Shaheed Benazir Bhutto: The Eighth Queen

The charismatic daughter of Zulifqar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, twice prime minister and one of the most popular political leaders of Pakistan, was (and still is) widely loved and revered by the majority of Sindhis and many non-Sindhis as well across Pakistan. Her iconic status in Sindh is well-described by Kazi (2008).

> She was always an enormously popularly popular leader and a huge crowd puller. She was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, an ideal eastern wife and an ideal mother. Above all else, she had suffered so much throughout her life and had shown so much courage in the face of adversity. The combination had virtually turned her into a goddess for the people of Sindh. (p. 131)

Shah depicts how Benazir enjoys the status of a mythical heroine among her supporters. Kazi's and Shah's discourses are predominately same as both mythologize the persona of junior Bhutto.

> To them [Sindhi Pirs and landlords] she was a mixture of several things: sister, daughter, heroin, queen. She was like the Seven Queens of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, that Sufi poet who wrote so movingly of the women of Sindh who'd fought oppressors, led wars, lost their lives for their lovers. Benazir had lost her beloved father, but she would not accept death or exile. She pitched herself in a full tilt against General Zia and the might of the army: she was braver than most men Sikandar had ever known. (Shah, 2014, p. 211-12)

The supporters and followers of Benazir Bhutto not only saw her as a political leader and savior of the Sindhis, but beyond this, they also associated with their leader at a personal level. In reverence, she was honored with the title of daughter, sister, and queen. She was successful in

keeping the legacy and cult of her father alive by enthralling the Sindhi masses with the slogan of "*Zinda hey, Bhutto Zinda hey*" (literally meaning Bhutto is alive). As described in the examples above, she is usually depicted and projected as greater than life figure. However, Bina Shah portrays both aspects of her personality: as the eighth queen and as an ordinary human. Shah shows the readers the human side of her with details of Bhutto's childhood as a seven-year-old pampered Pinky being raised and groomed by an English governess. As a child, she was in love with chocolate, and in her chocolate dreams, she would fanaticize about it where everything was made of chocolate. However, her childhood is connected to the tragedy that lay ahead for her through a fictitious incident.

The narrative recounts a fictional event that foretells the tragic end of Benazir. One Afternoon, Benazir is taken by the family servants to the *Mazar* of a revered saint (shrine of Abdullah Shah Gazi) for *Tota-Fal,* a roadside fortune-teller who uses his parrot to pick out one's fortune from the laid out envelopes with cards describing the customer's future. Benazir's *Tota-Fal* foretells her status both as a 'queen' and the tragedy that eventually awaited her. The old Parrot-Master would tell it only hesitantly: "She is a queen, but not just any queen . . . she is the Eighth Queen, which Shah Abdul Latif wrote about on his final trip to Thar . . ." (Shah, 2014, p. 249). To the utter disbelief of the servants, he claims a mythical status of queen for her that like seven queens of Shah Latif, Benazir would also fight for the ideals of love, truth and freedom: "She would be separated from her beloved, and pine for it all her days in a foreign land. And she would return, and lead her people to victory from oppressors . . ." (Shah, 2014, p. 250). A curious and frivolous episode form childhood as it might seem, unfortunately the prediction of *Tota-Fal* turns out to be true. She became the prime minister of Pakistan, she did attain the status of metaphorical queen (she is often called as *shaheed rani*, the martyred queen). During General Zia's regime, she fought for democracy. She was separated for many years form her husband, Asif Ali Zardari who was facing corruption charges in jail, and finally she went into

self-exile after General Musharraf took over in 1999, and returned to Pakistan in 2007 to fight against the repressive regime.

Islam argues that Benazir's personality fluctuated between a real person and a metaphor, particularly, after her assassination she was turned into a myth:

> With martyr's blood, she has touched the sublime but left us in spiritual emptiness. Very few will ever know where the person began and the metaphor ended. There is a Chinese proverb: "Wronged souls don't vanish." And vanish she won't. Whatever she was, she has passed into sainthood" (Islam, 2008).

Islam's words reflect a common discourse dominant in Benazir's (Sindhi) following at large that tends to see her as a greater-than-life figure. Similarly, the novel also blurs the boundary between the real and the fictional, between Benazir as a myth and a real-life person. In one account, she is a real child of her class and background, yet in another episode, she is turned into a mythical queen of Bhittai's Sufi verse: the myth living in her charisma, her martyrdom, her father's legacy, and in the nostalgia of the Sindhi people for their love for the glorious past. She would attain the status of an ever-living queen and a beloved of the Sindhi people who would symbolize her for their political and economic rights and prosperity. In Shah's narrative, she is serving as a connection between Bhittai's Sindh of the 18th century and today's Sindh facing complex realities of metropolitan life in the 21st century as represented by Ali Sikandar.

Shah (2014) represents Benazir as a well-groomed and courageous woman: "polished, educated woman, with a backbone of steel" (p. 210). She puts a fearless struggle against General Zia's authoritative regime during her father's persecution and after his execution. It also fictionally represents the factual events of her return to Pakistan in October 2007 after years of self-exile, and how her homecoming rally was hit by two suicide attacks killings more than a hundred people. Lastly, only hours before her assassination, the novel also represents Benazir in her Islamabad house, and her last public address at an election rally in the *Liaquat Bagh*, the place of her martyrdom.

Shah's representation of Benazir is seemingly the first such portrayal in English fiction as it highlights the cult and charisma of the popular leader

for the Sindhi masses. It emphasizes her significant place in the social and political discourse of Sindh. It shows that she is projected and accepted as the daughter of the nation and a martyred princess. To borrow Jalal's words: "In another characteristically Pakistani twist, a flawed politician had fallen prematurely only to become an unassailable martyr-saint, a larger-than-life Benazir—the mystical Shaheed Rani (martyred princess)." (2014, p. 349)

Shah represents two discourses about Benazir's political persona. Sikandar Ali, as a Sindhi Syed landlord stands for the traditional, hence, more popular discourse of a larger-than-life mythical leader for Sindhi masses, eulogized as a metaphorical queen of Sindh. His son, Ali Sikandar on the other hand, represents a discourse that is more dispassionate and objective as he is critical of her failure to deliver on her promises in her two terms as prime minister and cites serious corruption allegations against her husband. However, Shah seems to undermine the discourse of corruption and poor governance. Her portrayal of Benazir is done in a sympathetic vein: her innocent childhood, as a mournful young daughter not losing courage over her father's execution, and lastly a more serene and mature lady, resisting a military ruler for upholding the cause of democracy and constitution. Furthermore, Ali Sikandar's political journey of national identification takes him from harsh criticism of Bhutto towards liking her at the end of the novel. After being a witness to her last rally he changes his political affiliation as: "…more primal part of him wanted to run straight to her, to tell her he had been wrong about her before, that he agreed with everything she was saying. She deserved a second chance, and a third, and a fourth…." (p. 278).

4.4 The discourse of Sindhi Identity and Nationalism

Alongside a discourse on the Sufi culture of Sindh, Bina Shah constructs a political discourse based on Sindhi nationalism as the novel focuses on the Sindhi national heroes in the past as well as contemporary times. Shah underscores the way Sindhi heroes have fought and made sacrifices for the sake of honour of the motherland. They also played a significant role in the freedom movement of India and the creation of Pakistan. For instance, the political and religious leaders from Sindh organised conferences in Larkana

and Sann concerning *Khilafat* Movement highlighting their effective role in global and regional political and religious developments.

However, it can be argued that Bina Shah doesn't support the Sindhi nationalism of G. M. Syed. Syed had justified, demanded and ideologically struggled for an independent and autonomous Sindhi state, called *Sindhu Desh*. Though the novel portrays the political career of young G. M. Syed in detail, it chooses to ignore the powerful discourse of radical Sindhi nationalism wherein he had put forward an ideological and political case for an independent Sindh separate from the federation of Pakistan. Rather than depicting Syed as a more seasoned politician in his later years, the narrative portrays a confident and intelligent, fifteen-year-old G. M. Syed who successfully organizes *the Khilafat* Conference in Sann, his hometown in 1920. It portrays how he played an active role to motivate the Sindhi people against British rule in India. And how to mobilize the people of Sindh for the independence of India, he put his efforts into *Khilafat* Movement. He addressed the conference in these words:

> And so I say to you, we must put our faith in the *Khilafat* Movement. For it is only when the Muslim world is free, and the British have quit India, that Sindh will reap the benefits for a thousand years or more. . .. We must never accept oppression in our beloved Sindh, no matter who the oppressors are or where they come from (Shah, 2014, p. 139).

Shah gives representation to Syed's role in the Indian freedom movement and in the struggle for Pakistan, however, the author choses to ignore the latter's campaign against the federation of Pakistan when he made a demand for *Sindhu Desh* after he felt betrayed by the mainstream Pakistani leadership. For instance, in his book, *A Nation in Chains* (1974), he argued a case for independent Sindh. He claimed:

> The people of Sindh are a separate nation based on all principles recognized the world over as the principles essential for nationhood. Those principles are (i) separate homeland, (ii) separate language, (iii) distinct culture, (iv) a body of historical traditions and, (v) existence of special political and economic interests. (Syed, 1974, p. 40)

Syed builds this argument to reject Pakistan's official discourse of Muslim nationhood terming it as slavery. He claimed that the people of Sindh were not ready to live as slaves whether they were imposed in the name of religion, Pakistan or Muslim nationhood. (Syed, 1974, p. 39).

5. Conclusion

The discussion focused on Bina Shah's representation of political figures from Sindh in particular Zulifqar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, and G. M. Syed. It argued that *A Season for Martyrs* is a part of a larger discourse of Sindhi nationalism and Sindhi political identity. The narrative doesn't represent the Sindhi nationalist discourse of contemporary times which suggests that Shah's discourse favors Pakistan as a nation-state notwithstanding the author's emphasis on a more inclusive nation-state with sufficient representation of smaller provinces and ethnic groups. The novel gives representation to Zulifqar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, the two most popular leaders from Sindh, while it chooses to ignore the discourse of *Sindhu Desh*. The representation of the political side of the Bhuttos is understandable since the two popular leaders remained part of the mainstream national politics and did not support the radical aspect of the politics of Sindhi nationalism. Hence, through the portrayal of Bhuttos, Shah, from Sindhis' perspective, is supporting a nationalistic vision of Pakistan as a federation. Towards the end of the novel, Ali Sikandar's change of heart to become a supporter of Benazir also supports this argument. Furthermore, some more active members of the People's Resistance Movement also soften their stance towards Benazir Bhutto as they believe she deserved a second chance for the sake of democracy and progress of Pakistan. While Shah ignores the radical Sindhi nationalism, however, she does present a softer and de-radicalized version of Sindhi nationalism whereby she gives a powerful representation to brave heroes of Sindh, its rich culture of Sufism, and ideals of honour and sacrifice.

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