

# Saba's Transcendence from Objectification to Self-nullification: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the study:** This study examines the unique characterization of Umera Ahmad's intangible ideas through the journey of Saba in the novel *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan*. Saba is a woman with an independent mind, not only in regards to the world around her but also with her own personal decisions. Her ambition to pursue higher education and her desire to think and reason for herself are not acceptable to her society.

**Methodology:** This patriarchal society expects women to adhere to the predetermined norms and standards and to remain silent in the face of injustice. Despite the societal pressure to treat Saba as an object with no autonomy or ability to think or reason, she refuses to succumb and instead opts for self-nullification. She refuses to be reduced to an object with no rights or power, preferring to maintain her identity and not be stripped of her individuality.

**Findings:** She demonstrates her courage and strength of character in the face of adversity and shows that she is not one to be easily subjugated. This is mirrored in the title of the novel, *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan*, which is a reference to the concept of self-nullification of the ego found in several religions including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam.

**Conclusion:** This concept is also related to the Platonic concept of 'bittul ha'yesh' "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis: 18: 27). These are experiences of the inner self that turn self into nothingness. Saba's mystical experiences enable her to achieve self-annulment by negating her ego.

**Keywords:** Female Objectification, Self-nullification, Resilience, Transcendence.

## Introduction

### *Self-nullification in Religions*

Self-nullification in religions refers to the practice of engaging in actions that reduce one's ego and self-interest to focus on the greater good and deepen one's connection with a higher power (Eliade, 1987).

## Article History

Received:  
July 17, 2024

Revised:  
September 15, 2024

Accepted:  
September 23, 2024

Published:  
September 25, 2024

This approach is found in many religious traditions, encouraging individuals to transcend personal desires and align with the divine (Jacobson, 1995). Practices like meditation, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and renouncing material possessions are often key to this process (Keown, 2013). Abstaining from personal pleasures, such as alcohol or other indulgences, is also considered a way to cultivate spiritual focus and resist ego-driven behaviors (Zaehner, 1962). Fundamentally, self-nullification involves surrendering one's identity to a higher purpose, emphasizing service and charity (Jacobson, 1995). By setting aside personal desires, individuals often experience peace and unity with a higher power, achieving a higher state of spiritual awareness (Eliade, 1987).

Historically, self-nullification has been linked to notable figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, who gave up his rights as a lawyer to lead a non-violent movement for Indian independence (Neary, 2023). His self-sacrifice exemplifies how relinquishing personal privileges can benefit society as a whole (Gandhi, 2008; Sinha, 2009; Godrej, 2017). Religious teachings also encourage followers to serve greater causes, often prompting them to sacrifice personal freedoms to help others (Jacobson, 1995). Modern examples include donating to charity or volunteering, actions that exemplify the selfless spirit of self-nullification (Wiederkehr-Pollack, 2006).

In Judaism, self-nullification is seen as a process of setting aside personal desires to prioritize the needs of others, fostering humility and a stronger connection to God (Levisohn, 2020). As Wiederkehr-Pollack (2006) notes, this concept is evident in the Bible, Oral Law, Rabbinic teachings, Mysticism, Hasidism, and contemporary Jewish thought, underscoring its significance across various dimensions of Jewish life.

The *Sfat Emet* (Resnick, 2013; Shuchat, 2024) means that the foundation of everything is submission to the Creator. It explores the history and complexity of *bittul ha'yesh*, and examine the different ways it has been interpreted. It examines the concept of self-nullification, defined as the process of surrendering one's own will and identity in service of a greater cause. The article delves into the paradoxical nature of self-nullification, examining both its transitory and permanent effects. Wiederkehr-Pollack (2006) argues that while self-nullification can be a powerful tool for personal growth, it can also lead to feelings of alienation and a sense of disconnection from the world. Through both philosophical reasoning and examples from literature and religion, Wiederkehr-Pollack investigates the implications of self-nullification, ultimately concluding that it is a necessary yet challenging journey of individual transformation. The author excels at exploring both sides of the paradox, providing readers with a comprehensive overview of the implications of this complex topic. Shatz (2018) explores the tension between these two forms of self-transcendence in Judaism: Judaism emphasizes the importance of submitting to rules as a form of self-transcendence, which involves the conquest or eradication of egoistic desires to connect with God and infuse life with meaning. However, it also asks individuals to make choices that go beyond the technical law and prioritize the societal good, by taking into account virtue considerations and emulating God's ways. Self-transcendence also involves putting oneself first at times.

Self-nullification in Christianity (Merton, 1960) is the idea of completely surrendering oneself to God, and the recognition that one's own will is secondary to God's. It is the idea that one should accept God's will for their life and humbly submit to his will (Foster, 1998). This concept is based on passages from the Bible, which states: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:3-8).

Self-nullification, or *atmavimutti*, is a concept in Hinduism (Eliade, 2009) that refers to the idea of transcending the individual ego and completely surrendering to the Divine. It is a process in which one relinquishes the small self and its attachments in order to merge into a higher, more universal identity. In

this process, one surrenders all attachment to the limited, conditioned ego and its desires in order to realize one's true nature as the infinite Self, or Atman (King, 2019). This is seen as a necessary step for spiritual liberation, as it is only when we let go of the ego that we can experience our true, divine nature.

Self-nullification in Islam is the idea that one must surrender their ego and desires to God in order to be closer to Him. It is a form of humbling oneself to God and recognizing that all power belongs to Him. It is an internal surrender of one's will to the will of God. It is a concept that is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and is often practiced through? Prayer, meditation, and spiritual reflection. Eskandari (2018) explored Ibn Sina's reasons for self-denial in depth in his review and critique. It offers a detailed analysis of Ibn Sina's approach to self-denial, exploring its philosophical implications and how it can be applied in practice. She also discusses the implications of Ibn Sina's approach to self-denial for modern Islamic life. It provides an insightful look at the importance of self-denial in Islamic spirituality (for detail see: Eskandari 2018).She examines how self-denial is a necessary part of religious life, and how Ibn Sina's approach to it is both unique and effective. She examines how Ibn Sina's approach to self-denial differs from that of other Islamic scholars and how it can be used to achieve spiritual growth and development. Avicenna argues that human souls cannot exist without their bodies - they are created in them. He believes that plurality can only be attributed to bodies, not souls, as souls are singular. Furthermore, divine jewelry should be both multiple and distinct; if it is not, it is impossible. Additionally, he believes that the principle of closure does not apply to the immaterial world, as it only relates to the nature.

The most famous and well-known example of a person who practiced self-nullification is Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). He devoted his life to serving Allah and teaching the principles of Islam. He practiced self-nullification by living a simple life, not taking any material wealth or possessions, and avoiding luxurious items. He also set an example by not seeking recognition or honor, and instead seeking humility and submission to Allah. Other prominent figures such as Imam Ali and Imam Husayn also practiced self-nullification (Nasr, 2012).

Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Allana, 1967; Zaidi & Shaheedi 1993) was one of the most prominent figures in the Pakistan Movement. He is widely known for his self-sacrifice, passion, and dedication to the cause of Pakistan. He is also remembered for his self-nullification, a voluntary relinquishment of personal rights and possessions, in order to pursue a greater cause. He advocated for the establishment of a separate Muslim state in the Indian subcontinent and was instrumental in the formation of Pakistan. Jinnah's self-nullification was exemplified in his renunciation of his legal practice, his relinquishment of his personal wealth, and his avoidance of all material comforts in order to devote himself to the cause of Pakistan. He also gave up his British knighthood to become a Pakistani citizen. Jinnah's self-nullification was a major factor in the success of the Pakistan Movement, as he was able to inspire others to make similar sacrifices. His example of self-denial and dedication to the cause of Pakistan was a major inspiration for the people of the Indian subcontinent, and his legacy continues to inspire people today.

### ***Self-nullification in Literature***

Self-nullification has been a popular theme in literature for centuries. This concept, which involves negating one's own identity or existence, has been explored in many works, often as a means of expressing an individual's struggles with self-acceptance or inner turmoil. Self-nullification can manifest in many different forms, from the internalized self-hatred of the protagonist in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) to the outward nihilism of the narrator in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942).

Lazarus (2019) explores the concept of self-nullification, in the works of Bronte and Camus. The article provides an in-depth look at how self-nullification is expressed in their works. Gallimard (2019) provides Evidence from both authors to support the concept. Additionally, the article provides a thoughtful analysis of the implications of self-nullification on literature and society. In Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), the main character struggles with feelings of worthlessness and loneliness throughout her life. Jane's self-nullification is rooted in her feelings of inferiority, which are largely due to her lack of

social standing and her belief that she is unattractive. As a result, she often puts herself down and presents herself as inferior in order to avoid the judgment of others. For example, when she finally meets the wealthy Mr. Rochester, she downplays her accomplishments and presents herself as an uneducated and lowly governess, despite her intelligence and accomplishments. In this way, Jane is able to protect herself from potential rejection, while also negating her own identity in the process.

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) also explores the concept of self-nullification, but with a more nihilistic tone. The novel follows the life of Meursault, a man who is detached from the world and his own emotions. He views the world with a sense of apathy and indifference, and believes that life has no inherent purpose or meaning. This nihilism is reflected in Meursault's self-nullification, in which he seeks to erase his own existence and identity by denying his emotions, his memories, and his sense of self-worth. In one scene, he muses, "I felt that I had been nothing but a spectator of life and that I no longer existed." Here, Meursault expresses his desire to be nothing more than an observer, to the point where he no longer recognizes himself.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Stranger*, self-nullification is used as a means of expressing the protagonists' inner turmoil. Jane's self-nullification is rooted in her feelings of inferiority, while Meursault's is a result of his nihilistic worldview. Through their actions, both characters are able to protect themselves from potential rejection, while also simultaneously negating their own identity in the process.

Overall, self-nullification has been a popular theme in literature for centuries. It is often used as a way of expressing an individual's struggles with self-acceptance or inner turmoil, and its manifestations can take many different forms. By exploring this concept, authors are able to provide insight into the inner lives of their characters, as well as explore the ways in which individuals can use self-nullification as a means of protecting themselves from potential rejection.

The relationship between mysticism and feminist spirituality often highlights themes of self-nullification as a transformative process, allowing individuals to transcend ego and align with a greater collective purpose (Engel et al., 2008). The present study deals with Saba's inward journey towards self-nullification. Saba's self-nullification is a prime example of her selflessness and strong sense of morality. Saba had been wrongfully accused of infidelity and was subjected to a cruel and unjust punishment of being divorced from her beloved husband. Despite this, Saba maintained her dignity and refused to remarry Afreen, even though he had been a single parent and was in need of a partner. Instead, Saba chose to endure her hardships alone and eventually moved away with her daughter, leaving her family embarrassed and ashamed. Saba's actions showed her capability to forgive, her commitment to her moral values and her unconditional love for her daughter. Her decision to leave was a selfless act and a testament to her courage and strength of character. She may have been denied a sense of familial belonging, but her self-nullification enabled her to live with a sense of dignity and purpose.

## Literature Review

Pakistani authors have granted women activists the liberty to look into the subject of female oppression and mistreatment in a patriarchal society. Through literary works, these authors are striving to bring to light the status of women in the larger community. According to Miti Pandey (2003), British as well as Indian female authors have advanced the notion of women's rights through their writings, thereby earning themselves the label of "feminist writers". Miti Pandey puts it as:

*"Women's emancipation is no more a slogan now, it is a reality. This became possible when women in India and women in Britain recognized their femininity. This change in their attitude, as was expected, reflected in the writings of the authors during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, their being women writers and authors who demonstrate distinct choices of content associate them with feminist concerns. Their fiction recognizes the subordination of women, reveals the anxiety about the sexist misinterpretation of women and deals not only with the experiences of maternity, love, loss, despair, isolation,*

*suffering and mental derangement but also with the growing perception of themselves as individuals capable of making existential choices". (Pandey, 2003: i)*

Umera Ahmad uses her literary works to empower and express the struggles of Pakistani women in a male-dominated society. Her stories are unique in that, rather than simply depicting the "plight" of women, she also highlights their resilience and strength. Her female characters are portrayed as self-aware and determined individuals, who are willing to persist even in the most difficult of circumstances. As such, her works serve to both challenge the status quo, and provide a much-needed source of inspiration for the wider female population in Pakistan.

Ahmed (2009) explored the importance of literature in capturing the evolution of women's standing in Pakistani society during the Zia regime. He suggested that literature reflects the values and beliefs of a community, making it a useful tool for understanding how women were viewed and treated in this particular society at the time. The period saw the introduction of laws that, for the first time, brought women's issues to the forefront of public discourse, making this period a particularly important one for women's rights and for the study of women's representation in literature. Ahmed (2009) argued that by examining literature from this period, we can gain insight into the social and political changes that were taking place, as well as the resulting impact on women's standing in the community.

Muneeza Shamsie (2005) highlighted the negative effects of newly-instated profanity laws in his works. These rules were seen to unfairly target the most vulnerable members of a population such as women and minorities. These laws were utilized to repress women into a subordinate role in society, with numerous restrictions placed on them when it came to participating in certain activities such as the arts or sports. Husain Haqqani (2005) further expounded upon this system in his book Pakistan, in which he discussed how the legal system under Zia imposed further limitations on women, such as needing a witness for financial transactions. These rules were seen to be severely detrimental to the rights of women, and have been highlighted by both Shamsie and Haqqani (2005).

Ahmad, Shahraz, and Sidhwa are among the many writers that explore and depict the social, political, and cultural issues through female characters in their works. For example, in Ahmad's "Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan," Saba is a woman who stands firm and courageous in a largely male-dominated society. This work portrays the Pakistani society as extremely male-centered, where women are oppressed and have to fight to maintain their identity. The female characters in these works are often portrayed as having their desires, emotions, and even lives sacrificed in this so-called struggle to attain their identity. Benet (2008) affirms that the feminization of talk has given women a legitimate voice and authenticity (p.133). Writers from different cultures have used their works to encourage women to raise their voices about their experiences.

In recent years, women have been empowered to express their experiences and ideas, no longer having to conform to outdated and outdated codes of conduct imposed upon them. They are increasingly using their voices to share their understandings of their surroundings, challenging the unnecessary and often oppressive expectations historically enforced on them. As women become more vocal about their opinions, it has become more apparent that these so-called codes of conduct have been more restrictive than necessary. This has caused many to ponder why these guidelines have been so strictly enforced in the first place. As Yuval-Davis (1997:47) asserts:

*"Even in less extreme situations, so-called cultural traditions are often used to legitimize the control and oppression of women. Indeed, some feminists have argued that strict cultural codes of what it is to be a 'proper woman' have been developed to keep women in an inferior power position" (Cited by Jackson, E. 2010:16).*

In Ahmed's classic novel, Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan, Saba is a woman determined to uncover her true identity and break free of the oppressive male-dominated society she lives in. She faces many obstacles set in place by androcentric practices and cultural norms. However, Saba's resilience and will to stand up

for herself, despite the male mistreatment and excessive power, creates a platform for further discussion and debate. It allows women to find their voice and make their own decisions, thus challenging the societal standards that have oppressed them for so long. Her remarkable story serves as an inspiration and a reminder of the strength and courage women possess, and how they can use it to speak out against injustice.

Pakistan is a nation based on Islamic beliefs and therefore, views on Western feminist ideologies are largely seen as a threat to its values. During the era of General Zia-ul-Haq, females were seen as battlefields where a few conservatively inspired people and chauvinists imposed their gender war. The female figures of society were oppressed and silenced by the male-dominated socio-cultural norms. In her works, author Ahmad conveys the message that the lack of trust in the female figures of society is due to the fact that the male figures of the society are not open to hearing them out. This reflects the unfortunate reality that the society we live in is male-oriented, where men take women as their honor and leave them in the name of honor.

Dar, S.R. (2017) explored the concept of female subalternity in Urdu literature, with a particular focus on Umera Ahmed's novel *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan*. This feminist critical analysis sought to uncover how the female characters presented in the novel were subjected to be subordinate to the male characters. Through this exploration, the researcher was able to identify that the women characters in the novel were placed in a subservient position to the male characters, and were often subject to oppressive dynamics. In addition to this, the researcher highlighted that the novel offered no alternative method of emancipation for the female characters, further perpetuating their subjugation. The findings of the research indicated that although the novel offers an insight into the gender dynamics of certain societies, it fails to challenge the patriarchal structures that are in place.

The role of women in Pakistani society has been a subject of great interest to many researchers, as they strive to gain a better understanding of how a male-dominated culture has affected the progress of women. The characters in this book portray the troubles and tribulations that women have to face in such a society (Yousafzai, 2020). Through these characters, it is possible to see the various methods and strategies used by these women to counter the oppression they have experienced. It is evident that the hardships and suffering of these women have served as a catalyst for the advancement of women's rights in Pakistan.

### ***Problem Statement***

The characterization of women in literature often reflects and reinforces societal norms and values, particularly within patriarchal contexts. In *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan*, Saba's journey highlights the struggle against systemic oppression and the challenges women face in asserting their identities and ambitions. This study aims to uncover the linguistic and discursive strategies employed in the novel that contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality and the marginalization of women's voices.

### ***Significance of the Study***

This study contributes to the existing body of feminist literary criticism by offering a nuanced analysis of Umera Ahmad's portrayal of women in *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan*. By employing a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, the research highlights the interplay between language, power, and gender, revealing how discourse shapes societal perceptions of women's roles. The findings will provide insights into the broader implications of language in constructing gender identities and power dynamics, informing both academic discussions and practical approaches to gender equality.

### ***Study Objectives***

1. To analyze the linguistic strategies used in *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan* that reinforce patriarchal norms and gender roles.
2. To investigate how Saba's character navigates and challenges societal expectations through her journey of self-nullification.
3. To explore the intersections of gender, power, and identity as portrayed in the novel.
4. To contribute to feminist discourse by revealing the underlying power dynamics within the text.

### ***Research Questions***

1. How does the language used in *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan* construct and reinforce gender roles?
2. In what ways does Saba's journey reflect the broader societal pressures faced by women in a patriarchal context?
3. What patterns emerge in the discourse surrounding male authority and female autonomy within the novel?
4. How can Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis illuminate the power dynamics at play in the characterization of women in Umera Ahmad's work?

### **Methodology- A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

#### ***Overview***

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is a method of analysis that focuses on the ways in which language and discourse are used to construct social identities and relationships. It is a way of understanding how power is structured and exercised in a particular context. This approach takes into account the ways in which gender, race, class, and other social categories intersect to shape language, discourse, and power.

#### ***Steps***

- a. Identify the research question: The first step is to define the research question. This will help guide the rest of the analysis.
- b. Identify key texts: Identify any key texts related to the research question. This could include books, articles, interviews, or other sources.
- c. Analyze texts: Analyze the texts using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. This involves looking at the language used in the text and how it is used to construct particular social identities and relationships.
- d. Identify patterns: Look for patterns in the language used to construct identities and relationships.
- e. Analyze power dynamics: Analyze the power dynamics in the text. Look for evidence of power being used to manipulate, control, or silence.

This research utilizes a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to examine the inequalities between men and women in terms of their roles in society. FCDA is a method of analysis which looks at how language is used to construct and reinforce gender roles and power dynamics. It focuses on the ways in which language is used to create and maintain social structures, ideologies, and identities. The research identifies the ways in which language is used to perpetuate male dominance and oppress women. The research firstly identifies the language used in the novel which reinforces gender roles, such as the use of the terms "male authority" or "male superiority". It then analyzes the relationships between the language and the underlying power dynamics within the society. It looks at how language is used to create and maintain social structures, ideologies, and identities. It analyzes how language is used to recreate and

perpetuate the imbalance between men and women. It explores the ways in which language is used to construct and reinforce gender roles and power dynamics.

## **Analysis**

In Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan, Saba's story is a representation of the struggles women face in male-dominated societies. As a female, Saba is denied the opportunity to explore her true identity due to the lack of space and opportunity provided to her in this world. This reflects the vast amount of social discrimination women have been subjected to in patriarchal societies. Despite being rendered powerless, Saba does not give up but rather strives to better her situation and that of her daughter. In order to protect her daughter from the pain of her past, Saba keeps it hidden from her. However, as Sara gets older she becomes increasingly curious about her extended family. The novel conveys a powerful message of hope and resilience, as it highlights Saba's journey of self-awareness and self-empowerment.

Ahmad's novel, explores the struggles of women in an ever-evolving Pakistani society, where traditional patriarchal norms are slowly diminishing. The protagonist, Saba, is faced with the challenge of dealing with her new mother-in-law, who is rooted in a conservative and oppressive family system. Saba is met with disapproval when she expresses her desire for education and independence. This conveys the immense pressure that is put on women to adhere to the outdated standards of society. Ahmad's novel highlights the difficulty of being a woman in a rapidly changing Pakistani society, where traditional values are slowly being replaced by new ones.

Saba is considered a "wild woman" because she is determined to further her education. Her uncle, who has the ultimate say in family matters, is a strict man who marries off his daughters very young. However, he chooses to send his only son, Arfeen Abbas, abroad to study. When Saba's father left for America, her uncle stepped in to act as the head of the family. Saba attempts to gain approval from her uncle to attend a university, but her enthusiasm and ambition makes her unwelcome in Arfeen's family.

Arfeen's mother is extremely protective of her only son and was very displeased when Arfeen proposed to marry Saba upon his return from the United States. Saba's family was also unhappy with Arfeen's plan to stay in the US with Saba after they were wed. His mother was worried that her connection with her son would be damaged if he married Saba. Although she was unable to stop Arfeen, she devised a malicious plan to ruin Saba's reputation by falsely blaming her for infidelity.

In order to embarrass Saba, the mother uses her daughter's wedding ceremony as a way to trap her. She lures both Saba and Adil into the same room, assigns them various tasks and locks them inside. After doing this, the mother calls her family members to the room to witness first-hand the "shocking disgraceful conduct" of Saba and Adil being together. She emphasizes her point by declaring that she has seen the deplorable behavior with her own eyes. The mother's plan is to shame Saba by revealing the two of them in the same room, in an attempt to discredit her before all of the wedding guests. As the situation deteriorates, Arfeen's parents organize a Kacheri (committee) to investigate the matter. Afreen's mother swears an oath on the Holy Quran, as it is widely considered an infallible witness and its words are respected and accepted without question. As a result, Saba's attempts to prove her innocence are disregarded, as nobody is willing to believe her. Furthermore, Adeel's absconding from the scene makes it even more difficult for Saba to clear her name, as Afreen's mother implies that Adeel's guilt is proven by his attempted flight from the situation.

Ahmad's story highlights the tragedy of women in many societies, where false accusations of promiscuity can be used to ruin a woman's reputation and even her life. In Saba's case, her husband Arfeen does not even bother to listen to her side of the story before hastily divorcing her and ruining her name. This treatment is not uncommon, and many women around the world are condemned to a life of shame and ostracism based on baseless rumors and false claims. To make matters worse, Saba is then offered as a wife to a much older man with four young children, in an attempt to cleanse the family's honor. Horrifyingly, this story is not unique and countless cases of women being subjected to public humiliation,



physical abuse and even death are reported in the name of protecting the family's honor. Yuval-Davis (1997: 45) argues that women are seen as symbols and “others” of their collective identity, and as such, are expected to uphold the group’s honor and respect:

*“Generally, women belong to and are identified as members of the collectivity in the same way that men are. Nevertheless, there are always rules and regulations – not to mention perceptions and attitudes – specific to women. Such constructions involve a paradoxical positioning of women as both symbols and “others” of the collectivity. On the one hand, women are seen as signifiers of the collectivity’s honour”. Yuval-Davis (1997: 45)*

Jackson asserts that in some communities, women are harshly punished or even murdered if their behavior is perceived as bringing shame or dishonor to their family or community.

*“[T]hat ‘women are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively’... This is why women in some communities are sometimes severely punished – and in the worst cases, tortured or murdered – by their relatives for breaches of conduct which are perceived as bringing dishonour and shame on their male relatives and community”. (Jackson, E., 2010:16)*

Shaheed also states that women are held responsible for representing the culture and collective identity of their community:

*“[S]ince women, more than men, are made the repositories of a community’s culture, which is the manifestation of collective identity”. (Shaheed 2007: 23)*

However, even today, there is a great need for research and discussion of these practices, which continue to oppress and repress women in Muslim countries and beyond.

Saba has big dreams of furthering her education and understanding the world around her, but her traditional relatives stand in her way. She knows that gaining knowledge can help her not only learn more about the world, but also better handle the conservative society she lives in. She decides to stay away from arguing with her male family members, as it will be useless. Instead, she turns to her friend Arfeen for help as he has recently come back from the United States, and she believes he will be more understanding and open-minded.

Saba asks Afreen what she thinks about education and if it is necessary for both men and women. Afreen explains that she believes that both genders should have the right to receive an education, as it is essential for everyone. Saba, then, in an effort to further explore the concept, poses another question in order to get a more detailed answer from Afreen.

*“So for what reason is your dad so against young women education? He sends his child to the extent USA for advanced education however won't permit me to get out of the house”. (Meri zaat zara-e- beneshan, p.25)*

*“Afreen asks why she insists to take admission to the university as she will be staying at home and the degree will be of no use. He clarifies, that he is a man and he needs higher education because he will be the bread earner for his family. “I need advanced education to have the option to procure more”” (Meri zaat zara-e- beneshan: 25).*

Saba is passionate about her pursuit of higher education, not just for the financial gains, but for a greater purpose - gaining self-awareness and understanding the world around her. She sees education as an opportunity to learn and grow, rather than just a source of monetary gain. Despite Arfeen's success in convincing his father to allow him to pursue higher education, Saba is still struggling to gain approval to

attend university. She is determined to pursue her dream of higher education as a means to gain knowledge and self-discovery.

Saba confronted her uncle when he insisted that she must wear a dark burka if she wanted to attend university. She argued that she would be more comfortable wearing a chador, a scarf that would cover her head and chest area, rather than the traditional burka. She reminded him that the chador was still modest and appropriate for school, yet allowed her more freedom of movement than the burka. She wanted him to understand that she could be accepted and respected without having to sacrifice her own comfort and freedom.

*"I am joining the University to gain an education, and I am aware of my self-respect and honor, I will not go unveiled, but take a chador. My head and body will remain covered, but I will not wear a traditional burka. Do you want to force the traditional burka on me so that, once I enter the University, I remove it and roam unveiled? Would that kind of veil help me or our family honor?"* (Meri zaat zara-e-Benishan, 28)

Ahmad conveyed the message that women's veil is a representation of family honor. He believes that Muslim women should have the freedom to choose how they want to express their faith and beliefs. He suggests that the traditional clothing guidelines should not be rigidly enforced. He believes that the purdah of the mind is more important than covering a woman's body in a burka. He wants men of Pakistani Muslim society to understand that women should be treated as individuals with respect and their sexuality should not be seen as something negative. Saba is attempting to advocate for the moral progress of Muslim women and to reshape the perception of them.

Neluka Silva's (2004) suggests that women's clothing, specifically the veil, plays an important role in how different groups of people are identified from one another. As Silva explains, veiling for Muslim women is one such visible signifier that clearly distinguishes them from other groups. According to Silva, women's bodies become a canvas for which group distinctions are made visible and obvious. In this way, women's clothing helps to promote a sense of belonging to certain groups and creates a sense of 'imagined communities' that are identified by the shared cultural markers of dress. Thus, Silva's argument helps to explain how the veil on the female body is used to mark group differences, and to illustrate the importance of clothing in the formation of different communities:

*"Within this complex framework, nation, religion and other categories of identity emerge as 'imagined communities' involving culturally inscribed markers of difference and belonging, with women functioning as important symbols of differences between groups. These differences are expressed through visible signifiers such as dress (e.g., veiling for Muslim women) so that according to Neluka Silva, 'the female body becomes the terrain on which [group] distinctions are made visible'"* (cited by Jackson, E., 2010:16).

Saba appears as a strong person through her interpersonal skills and logically convincing arguments. However, such a bold character and debating skills are unacceptable in a patriarchal society like Pakistanis. Women are never expected to possess any power. They are supposed to accept everything without question. The women who question are intolerable to the whole society. Fox-Genovese, E. (1991), argues that the socioeconomic growth of women as individuals lags behind the men because "For men to be fully self-realizing individuals, women must be self-denying" (129). That is the reason behind hampering women from perusing higher education. When a woman sacrifices her dreams and desires and accepts all duties and roles, then males can progress socially and economically as individuals. In order to maintain their individuality they suppress women's individuality.

Saba was in a difficult situation in which no amount of explanation or reasoning could save her. Her mother-in-law had brought together her family to shame her for her disloyalty, and no one believed her. They all ignored her desperate attempts for sympathy and instead listened to the vehement cries and insults being thrown at her. Saba's mother-in-law screams:

*"You wanton, witch, liar of a woman. Why would I send you to this room? You shameless, brazen woman! How dare you carry out your evil act in my son's room? How could we even think of taking such a woman as our daughter-in-law?" (Meri Zaat zara-e-Benishan: 52)*

The "chador", "traditional burka" and "revealed" here are viewed as symbols of respect and honor for a man. These lines imply that men cannot tolerate women going out in public without covering themselves. Additionally, the emphasis suggests that a respectable woman should possess qualities of meekness and submission. Saba attempted to speak out boldly for the individual identity of women by refusing to wear the veil. She defended her opinion that it is unnecessary to cover up one's body for the sake of religion; the character of a person decides their dignity and integrity instead of this external code of covering up.

Saba's aunt and uncle have named her 'Ruswae Zamana' due to her forward and progressive thinking. The fact that she refrains from wearing the traditional veil, which is considered the norm in this patriarchal society, is seen by her family as an act of defiance against the social and religious norms that are associated with the garment. They also interpret her views as her rejecting the norms of her family and going against the grain of traditional values. Shaheed states that the purpose of these restrictions placed upon women and their confinement to the four walls of home is to prevent them from gaining knowledge, restricting their access to education and training. Purdah is used to limit and, in some cases, prevent women from acquiring information or to pursue certain areas of study. It is also representative of the control and oppression of women. Women should wear the Purdah to pay homage to the male gender. Going out without it implies a possible hazard to the status of men and their uniqueness. The stringent and detached Purdah is a way to demonstrate the power men have over subordinate women. Ahmed's lines reflect the marginalization of women and how men impose a sense of honor on them, perceiving them as objects instead of individuals. The concept of Purdah, along with its control and restriction of female sexuality, is a way to reinforce the idea that women are destined to be used as commodities.

Saba and Aadil desperately attempted to clarify the circumstances, yet Aadil ended up irate and censured his aunt. When it was evident that he was disregarded, and the situation was deteriorating, Aadil chose to escape instead of substantiating his truth. Saba, being a female, had no other choice except to remain in the circumstance. The stunning circumstance made her become motionless, and she remained there like a statue. Shockingly, Naghmana (Typhoon, Qaisra Shraz) experienced increasingly physical brutality contrasted with Haroon, who was a male individual from the family. Saba also confronted physical and enthusiastic viciousness, yet Aadil effectively escaped from the situation. This demonstrates the irony of the circumstance, where both guys and females were similarly caught in a similar circumstance, yet the male individuals, for example, Haroon (Typhoon, Qaisra Shraz) and Aadil, were not physically ambushed. However, being females both Saba and Naghmana went through further subsequent torture. Saba's uncle pulls her hair to torture her:

*"Children watched excitedly in the courtyard, as her uncle dragged her by her hair and pushed her to the ground. Then he took his shoes off and let loose a string of beatings on her head. Saba tried to get hold of his hand. This only aggravated him. 'No uncle! Please stop! Don't hit me like this, not here in front of all the people. If you want to kill me just shoot me' uncle continued and Saba raised her head for the last time to look at the people watching her". (Meri Zaat Zar-e-Benishan: 55)*

Saba was embarrassed and humiliated by the incident of being beaten with a shoe by her uncle. She was desperate to shield herself from the shame and disgrace that it could bring her and her family. However, her uncle made sure that her disgrace was undeniable. When she returned home, her mother anxiously questioned her:

*"What have you come here for, after audaciously darkening your face? You bold lady! Proceed to suffocate yourself to death. Saba, you have ended up being a harmful snake*

*for my family. For what reason didn't I choke you to death when you were conceived?"*  
(Meri zaat zara-e- beneshan: 62)

She decides to live stronger through the trial as she addresses her mom,

*"I have not disgraced myself mother. You have all consolidated to disgrace me. I have accepted a lot of shame. Presently the ball is in your court, this family, and each individual who has unjustifiably blamed me"'. (Meri zaat zara-e- beneshan: 63)*

Saba is determined to stand up for herself and refuses to submit to the pressure from her family to conform. Despite this, Arfeen is still skeptical of her claims and she pleads with him to believe her. Unfortunately, the evidence is against her and Ahmad highlights the difficulties that women face when trying to prove their innocence in relation to matters of sexuality. Without any proof and false testimonies, it is almost impossible for women to demonstrate their moral integrity, leading to them being discriminated against and persecuted throughout their lives.

Ahmad expresses her worries about believing what women have to say. An important link is discovered between women, their words, and the idea of being quiet. Saba's desire to be seen as an individual and not just another woman who follows society's expectations is hindered by people who try to keep her quiet, both verbally and physically. This reflects a society that is against women having knowledge or pursuing their own unique identity. In a patriarchal society, a woman who is granted permission to pursue higher education is subject to intense control at every turn. Her appearance, her words, and even her thoughts are all monitored and scrutinized, which leads to her being confined to a limited role as a woman. Consequently, if she dares to think outside this box, she is met with disapproval and interruption. This leads to the idea of what it means to be a woman: to remain quiet, and to only speak when asked, and to conform to the expectations of others. In short, a woman is expected to stay within the boundaries of what is deemed "acceptable" behavior in this society.

At the start of the novel, Sara, a nineteen year old girl, is visiting her Uncle's house for the first time in her life. She is unsure of her mother's past life and her relatives, and is thus bewildered. Despite the fact that Saba chooses self-nullification, disguising her 'self' and her serious past from her daughter and people around her, Sara is determined to find out about her distant family. Saba's silence about her past creates a lack of communication between her and her daughter. Sara wants her mother to open up and share her past experiences with her, hoping for conversations, cuddles and fun banter with her. Saba had been entrenched in a deep silence that had prevented any kind of bond or connection from forming between her and her daughter, Sara. As the day drew to a close, the two engaged in a heated exchange, with Saba attempting to escape the memories of her past and Sara determined to uncover the secrets of her mother's past. Sara's suspicions were that her mother's silence was the result of her guilt over eloping with her father, and that this was why her family had disowned her. Ahmad's work highlighted the fact that women are often judged and stigmatized for living an independent life away from their families. As a result, Saba's daughter was left with a sense of hatred and confusion, struggling to comprehend her mother's identity.

At the conclusion of the novel, Sara discovers the reason behind her mother's distress. Whilst she was staying at Arfeen's residence, she had the opportunity to visit her mother's former home. There, she found out that her mother's immediate family was responsible for her prolonged imprisonment. Even though Sara was filled with hatred towards her newfound family, she quickly left Arfeen's house. Sara was filled with anger and frustration at the revelation of her mother's tribulations. The knowledge of her mother's suffering caused her to abandon her stay at Arfeen's and hastened her journey away from the family home. Despite her rage, she was able to leave the house without confrontation. Sara was left to ponder the situation of her mother's past. Although saddened by her mother's story, she was able to find solace in the knowledge that she had found her family. Despite the difficult circumstances, Sara was able to move on and carry on with her life. Sara had firmly decided that she would never marry into Afreen's family by marrying Afreen's son, her fiancé. Like her mother, Sara had the same adaptability and strength of

character. When she found herself in a difficult situation in a woman's guest house, she was determined to find a way to protect herself. Through this, Sara was able to demonstrate the same independence that her mother had. Afreen and her son searched tirelessly for Sara without any success. But after a great deal of effort, they eventually managed to locate her. They tried to persuade Sara to return home with them, but their attempts were initially unsuccessful. However, eventually, they were able to convince her to come back with them.

Finally, Sara was enlightened with the fact that Afreen's mother had confessed about her wrongdoings, and so the search for Saba began. After locating her, they pleaded for her forgiveness and urged her to come stay with them in their home.

*“Three months later her aunt her aunt made a confession that she had took a false oath on the Holy book. She victimized Saba deliberately through this plot”. (Meri Zaat Zara-e-Beneshan: 89)*

Ahmad's Saba is a strong and determined woman who is determined to never give up. Despite facing adversity and judgement from the society in which she lives, she stands her ground and refuses to compromise her self-respect or dignity. She is dedicated to living and surviving alone, no matter what the cost. She is a role model of resilience and strength, never wavering in her beliefs and values, and never wavering in her commitment to standing up for herself. In a world where women are often judged and treated unfairly, she stands as a beacon of light, showing that it is possible to stand strong in the face of adversity and be true to oneself. She is an inspiration to all who seek courage and strength in the face of difficult circumstances.

*“[Uncle says] Saba, Don't go anywhere, please come back to you home and stay with us. The youngest uncle tried to stop her. [Saba says] Uncle, I don't need a home to live but just a place, I have that one. She did not stop, then everybody tried to stop her. Uncle followed her to door but she didn't stop. She went back with the same quietness and peace with which she came”. (Meri Zaat Zara-e- Beneshan: 99)*

This scene shows Saba's self-respect, self-awareness. She strongly believes in her own capabilities and stands her ground in a society that puts her down and judges her. She does not compromise on her self-respect and refuses to go back to the home of her uncles. Saba keeps up her poise and does not let anyone dictate her life. She is determined to make her own way and finds the strength to live alone and survive in such a difficult situation. By standing up for herself and being brave, Saba nullifies any attempts to control her. She is strong in her convictions and shows her courage in the face of adversity. This is an example of her self-awareness, her resilience and her self-respect. Saba's self-respect and dignity is exemplary and inspiring. She stands firm in her beliefs and has the courage to not listen to the society's demands. She is strong and wise enough to stay true to herself, even when the ones she loves try to stop her from leaving. Despite all the pressure from those around her, Saba holds on to her dignity and never compromises on her self-respect. Her determination to lead her life on her own terms is admirable. Saba is a strong-willed character who never gives up and continues to live and survive in a society that judges her, demands her to prove her character, and treats her fiercely. Saba is a testament to her strength of character and high morale. She never lets her circumstances affect her and always stands firm in the face of adversity. Saba shows her strength of character when she refuses to stay at her uncle's home even though they begged her to stay. She didn't allow her circumstances to dictate her life and chose to stay alone in her own place. Her decision showed her determination to stand up for herself and not be dictated by anyone else. Saba's high morale is evident in her determination to keep going no matter what. She never gives up and continues to live and survive in a society that judges her, demands her to prove her character, and treats her fiercely. Despite all the difficulties she faces, Saba is able to maintain her optimism and resiliency. This is a testament to her strong will and self-esteem. Saba's strength of character and high morale are inspiring. Another prominent feature of Saba's character is her self-nullification that is evident in the excerpt below:

*"I forgave you, I have nothing in my heart against you. She stood up, her aunt started weeping like a child. Her uncle came forward saying 'I have been very cruel to you. Saba' interrupted him, I forgave you as well. I forgave everybody. She picked up her daughter and moved towards the door."* (Meri Zaat Zara-e- Beneshan on page 99)

Saba's self-nullification is truly remarkable in the novel Meri Zaat Zara-e- Beneshan. Despite all the suffering and injustice that she had endured, Saba is still able to forgive her family. She had no ill feelings in her heart towards them, and instead chose to forgive them for their cruelty. This act of kindness and compassion was a testament to her strong moral character and her unwavering faith in the power of forgiveness. She is a model of grace and humility, demonstrating the importance of self-nullification in the pursuit of peace and justice. By forgiving her family, Saba showed that even in the midst of great suffering, we can still choose love and forgiveness.

The excerpt below shows Ahmad tried to portray the deep relation between Saba and her God, and her renunciation and self-nulification. As Hayder says to Sara:

*"Papa thinks that Saba has loved her so much, and when he divorced her, she abandoned the world. But I do not think so. I think you mom had a very special relation to God. She would be thinking that she is under the protection of God.....[When this incident happened], she would be thinking Arfeen Abbas has not deserted her rather God has left her. So, she had been struggling the rest of her life to reconcile with her God."* (Meri Zaat Zara-e- Beneshan on page 132).

*"Your mother has loved God so much that she had no other materialistic pursuits. But Sara you do not have such a relation with God. You can never attain such kind of contentment like Saba Kareem. You can leave home but you cannot renounce world."* (Meri Zaat Zara-e- Beneshan on page 133).

Sara is astute enough to forgive the wrongdoings of her family members, and, after extensive deliberation, grants them a chance to make amends and create a happier future. At the conclusion of the narrative, Sara's compassionate pardon of Arfeen and his family resolves the issue that had been plaguing them. She accepts Arfeen's son's proposal of marriage without any coercion, suggesting a promising start towards a brighter future. In doing so, she solves the puzzle of her mother's silence and puts an end to it by absolving her relatives. Her gracious act of kindness brings closure to the problem that had been lingering for a long time.

Sara's journey began in uncertain uncertainty and ended in unwavering confidence. Throughout the novel, Ahmad weaves the story of a mother and daughter, Sara and Saba, as they battle to make their voices heard. Despite the opposition they face, Saba's strength and determination remain unwavering. She represents a woman's quest for empowerment, advocating for the rights of women in Pakistani society. Throughout her struggles, from her abuse to her confrontation with the male-dominated society, Saba never backs down, displaying remarkable courage and conviction in her fight for freedom and acceptance. She ultimately succeeds in her mission and is rewarded with the acceptance of her own independent life as a self-empowered woman.

Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan offers an insightful look into the male-dominated society of Pakistan and how it shapes the lives of women. It is evident that the author has used the narrative to emphasize the unfair male authority in the society. The story exposes the power of men over women, however it also serves to enlighten women, encouraging them to speak up and take control of their lives. The story follows the journey of Sara, a young woman who strives to stand up for herself and her mother against the oppressive patriarchy. Through her struggles, the story highlights the importance of self-assertion and resilience in the face of adversity. Moreover, it underlines the idea of self-negation, which is often overlooked due to its intangible nature. The story brings to light the idea of women's public voice and the need to negotiate their positions within society. It calls for a re-evaluation of the patriarchal norms, and encourages women

to break the traditional moulds of objectification. In this way, Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan presents an inspiring tale of a woman's journey to reclaim her own autonomy and encourages a sense of liberation and power through Saba's journey.

Saba, the protagonist of the novel, is a character who embodies the truth and authenticity of what it means to be a woman. She is a shining example of strength and courage that is so often lacking in women. At the same time, however, Saba's mother-in-law is a representative of how women can be their own worst enemies in a man's world. Ahmad highlights the fact that it is not only men who perpetuate patriarchy and women's subjugation, but that women can be just as much to blame, if not more so. The novel masterfully captures the way in which women can be subjected to hatred and prejudice from other women, even in a man's world. Through Saba's story, we see how both male and female misogynists can be equally damaging to women's progress, and the fight for equality. Arfeen's mother is a traditional woman who adheres to a very specific view of how women should act. She believes that an ideal woman should be devoted to her family, be obedient to her male relatives, be a good mother to her children, and remain chaste before marriage. She is intolerant of any woman who does not meet these standards, and it has become her mission in life to ensure that all women conform to her ideal. She often disciplines women who do not meet her expectations, as she believes it is her duty to keep them on the "right path". Women are born into a society that is heavily biased towards them, and as a result, experience unfairness, inequity, and mistreatment from the wider population. Saba is an incredibly strong character, however, who never gives up hope in the face of adversity. She keeps her past life a secret from her daughter and continues to nurture her, even in the toughest of times.

Nevertheless, the theme of the novel is great, however, Umera Ahmad's execution of self-nullification in her novel was very weak and lacked adequate knowledge about the concept. Self-nullification does not mean renouncing the world completely and Ahmad's portrayal of this did not reflect this. Rather, Saba's decision to opt for menial labor and not pursue a degree or job was not an example of self-nullification. Self-nullification involves understanding and accepting that one's abilities and potential lies with Allah and submitting to His will, not abandoning potential opportunities and sacrificing them for labor. Therefore, Ahmad failed to understand the concept of self-nullification properly and her weak portrayal of it in the novel is indicative of this.

## Conclusion

The novel's exploration of its female characters' experience reveals the immense struggle women face against the oppressive power of male-dominated society. It exposes the various ways in which men try to control the female body and sexuality - through sexual abuse, manipulation, suppression, and covering their bodies to confine them to their homes. The novel also highlights how women's bodies are controlled and abused through seemingly harmless and traditional cultural practices, such as teaching women to dress in a certain way, to be obedient to men, to not ask questions, and to remain silent. This reveals the stark contrast between feminist and anti-feminist perspectives, in which feminists oppose the subordinate position of women in society, while anti-feminists stress the differences between men and women that make them more vulnerable to mistreatment and injustice. as Pandey asserts:

*"Feminists play down the limitations in the role and temperament of women imposed on them by biology while emphasizing the inequitable subordinate status forced on them by society. Anti-feminists [Freud] on the other hand stress the biological differences between males and females to the detriment of the latter while watering down the social injustices they are subjected to". (Pandey 2003: 25)*

Ahmad speaks out for the rights of women and how they are often controlled to follow the rules that are created by men. This control of women by men turns the body of a woman into a battlefield where a conflict between the sexes takes place. The men, who are in power, wish to treat the female body as their own possession and feel superior by forcing their will on women. The women, however, have to take part

in this battle, whether willingly or unwillingly to meet the expectations of the men and to fulfill their duties as obedient wives.

Women have an inborn inclination to defy the standards set against them. The standards and rules that have been established become a hindrance between them and the things that they aspire for. They yearn to be able to pick their own life partners, to pursue educational opportunities, and to be treated with respect and equality, without any kind of prejudice. This desire can be summed up in the expression of hoping for a harmonious and respectful future in which women are not just seen as equals to men, but are truly revered and appreciated for who they are.

Michael Foucault speaks of the significance of resistance in the battle of power, claiming that power does not solely rest in the hands of the powerful, but rather, those without power can still negotiate power through resisting. Michel Foucault's notion of power rests on the idea that power is a form of control, and resistance is the reaction against it. As Foucault (1979) states, "Wherever power is exercised, there is resistance" (p. 95). This implies that power is never absolute, but is always challenged and limited by resistance. Resistance can be seen as an attempt to subvert the status quo and create change, and it is often a necessary element in any kind of progress. Saba's story is a perfect example of this dynamic in action. Despite the immense power that Afreen's family had over her, Saba was able to challenge it through various forms of resistance. These ranged from negotiating her position and refusing to accept an undignified status, to successfully obtaining admission to the university. In this way, Saba was able to push back against the power dynamics and ultimately achieve her goals. Overall, Foucault's idea that power and resistance are inextricably linked is a powerful one that can be seen in countless examples throughout history.

The idea of resistance as a form of power is demonstrated in the story of Saba. Saba refuses to accept her parents' home, a place she sees as a place of judgement and humiliation. Instead, she chooses to give up the security of having a home in order to maintain her sense of pride. Ahmad highlights the difficulty that women face when having to make the decision to either stay at home or leave, ultimately encouraging them to find an alternative solution that is both safe and respects their dignity. Through this, the author emphasizes the importance of resisting power and finding strength in the face of power. Resistance is a way of negotiating power and finding a balance between the powerful and the powerless. As Foucault (1979) argues, "The more the power is exercised, the more resistance it generates" (p. 95). The story of Saba is an example of the power of resistance, as she is able to assert her identity and find a way to remain true to herself, despite the power of her parents and society.

## **Acknowledgements**

None

## **Conflict of Interest**


Authors declared NO conflict of interest.

## **Funding Source**

The authors received NO funding to conduct this study.

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