

“I control you because I care for you”: Three Cs of Patriarchy in Shandhana Minhas’s *Tunnel Vision*

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Abstract



*This paper argues that care and control do not function as opposing forces within the Pakistani patriarchal social system but work as entangled acts through which hegemonic authority becomes legitimate and difficult to contest. This study brings Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s theorisation of non-innocent care and Antonio Gramsci’s account of hegemony in conversation with Michel Foucault’s concept of discipline to conceptualise care, control, and consent as three pillars of patriarchy that I term the ‘Three Cs of patriarchy’. Shandana Minhas’s literary text *Tunnel Vision* (2007) is read diffractively to see how patriarchal power functions within an individual’s intimate, familial, social and institutional relations. The analysis discloses how the female protagonist’s comatose body presents a paradoxical situation where she is both cared for and controlled when she loses her consciousness, voice, and agency. Furthermore, Ayesha’s encounters reveal that care can implore consent to normalise unequal relations. Such patriarchal dynamics of care make control appear protective, whereas failure of such apparent care causes harm to vulnerable bodies in different ways.*

Keywords: Patriarchy; Care; Consent; Discipline; Pakistani Fiction

Introduction

Pakistani patriarchy is rarely articulated in the overt language of control. Culturally legitimate idioms such as protection, obligation, and honour are used to describe the regulatory power of patriarchy. In conventional patriarchal Pakistani society, masculine ideals are closely tied to the responsibilities of providing food and protecting the family. Moreover, men are expected to protect family honour, which is directly linked to women’s sexuality, appearance, mobility, and social conduct. It is no surprise that concepts like *ghairat* and *izzat* are used to measure one’s masculine capability. Consequently, masculine behaviours and practices involve regulating women in men’s lives as sisters, wives, and daughters (Shroff, 2021). An empirical study of Pakistani women’s mobility shows that gendered restrictions are clearly embedded in social norms of family honour, seclusion, and the family’s social respectability (Mumtaz et al., 2013). Research has also shown that gendered restrictions on women’s free mobility are mostly articulated through apparent concerns about their safety, sexuality, and family honour (Khan, 1999; Adeel et al., 2018). It is also noted that women’s mobility for education or employment is particularly regulated because women’s presence in public space is perceived as exposing the family to reputational risk. In practice, these regulations are more powerful because they are not presented as forms of domination; the vocabulary of care, responsibility, and pure concern for women’s safety and the family’s honor is used (Arif, 2006). Such twisting blurs the boundary between care and control in a Pakistani patriarchal society, where care is one of the socio-culturally intelligible forms through which patriarchal authority is not only exercised but also legitimised.

In this paper, I take this conceptual inadequacy in Pakistani patriarchal society that believes in conventional opposition between *care* and *control*, where the former is associated with women’s agency, ethical responsiveness, and relationality, whereas the latter is used in the language of patriarchal domination. In this paper, I do not treat *care* and *control* as two separate modalities; rather, they are conceptualised as dynamically entangled practices that provide power and legitimacy to patriarchy, thus producing such conditions where domination is experienced as consensual. On the other hand, care not only conceals coercion but also participates in the production of consent by wrapping restrictions in the cover of responsibility, protection and relational obligation. To understand this entanglement between care, control and consent, this paper brings three theoretical arguments in conversation with each other to formulate an analytical framework. These arguments are: ‘feminist care ethics’, particularly discussed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who highlights

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the political and material implications of care; ‘hegemony’ as the production of consent through internalised dominant norms; and Michel Foucault’s (1978) conceptual notion of disciplinary and biopolitical power through which subjects’ bodies, conduct and lives are conducted. Read together, rather than sequentially, these perspectives illuminate a recursive architecture of patriarchal power in which care legitimises, consent naturalises, and discipline consolidates, thus enforcing the authority that the preceding stages have rendered legitimate.

Three Cs: Care, Control, and Consent in Ayesha’s Relational World

Tunnel Vision (Minhas, 2007) follows Ayesha Siddiqui, a professionally independent thirty-one-year-old Karachi woman whose narration unfolds from a hospital bed after a car accident following her failed marriage proposal to her boss’s son, Saad. The novel’s movement between Ayesha’s present condition and her memories reveals how her relationships with family, friends and colleagues shape her understanding of care, obligation, intimacy, and agency. Read diffractively, Ayesha’s encounters at home and work are not separate examples of patriarchal care, control, and consent; rather, they get entangled across domestic, professional, intimate, and public spaces. Reading of the selected text demonstrates how care may become obligation, recognition can be a way to control, and consent may be formally present while materially constrained. The following analysis therefore reads Ayesha’s encounters and relationships as vulnerable sites where three Cs of patriarchy are at work.

Domestic Care and the Patriarchal Bargain

Ayesha’s negotiation with patriarchy begins with her education in *care as obligation* within the domestic sphere. From childhood, she observes a household in which care is feminised and rendered so ordinary that its labour becomes almost invisible. Ayesha remembers when her mother, whom she calls *Ammi*, falls ill, and the doctor asks who takes care of the home and children. Her father answers, “She does, naturally” (Minhas, 2007, p. 252). The word “naturally” transforms a historically organised division of labour into a self-evident fact. *Ammi* is not simply the person who performs domestic labour; rather, she is understood as the person who *naturally* should. A Foucauldian reading makes visible the power in this ordinary statement. Power becomes effective when arrangements become normal and inevitable. The doctor interrupts this naturalisation by locating *Ammi*’s condition in material demands: “She’s just had a child. She’s not that young anymore. It’s just exhaustion, plain and simple” (p. 252). It was obvious that the difficult pregnancy, breastfeeding, childcare, domestic labour, and inadequate support from her family converge upon *Ammi*’s body, but Abba’s response to her problems complicates any simple opposition between caring and controlling behaviour. Initially, he is irritated and dismisses his wife’s condition, saying, “I thought she was just being dramatic”, but later goes to buy medicine (p. 252). He then insists that she take her medicine regularly to be able to perform some domestic work. This care comes from the realisation that she is an “orbit” to all the planets, their children, “the home. The kitchen”. He knows that without her “his carefully constructed kingdom, his refuge from the harsh outer world” would simply collapse (p. 253). We see that Abba’s care is not necessarily insincere, but its sincerity does not undo the gendered structure within which that care operates. This distinction is central to the argument: patriarchal care does not need to be false to become regulatory. Its emotional authenticity can strengthen its power.

Ayesha’s relationship with her mother carries the same ambivalence. Ayesha’s mother goes through serious mental health issues after her husband one day disappears without informing everyone. Ayesha’s care for her mother and her well being is genuine but she also realizes that the moral ethics of care turn into an obligation for her that force her to subordinate her own desires. Her desire to spend a peaceful life with Saad is shadowed by her thoughts that are centred around her mother as Ayesha narrates in the novel, “She needed me. There was that word again” (p. 299). This “Need” is an organising principle of Ayesha’s subjectivity where is she has to prove herself as a “good girl” and “sensitive daughter”; she has to surrender because she thinks, “Her need was greater than mine” (p. 299). Ayesha is not naïve and she is able to recognise that responsibility of taking care of their mother could also fall upon her brother who is an adult too but she quickly polices her own objection because even of thinking of this option may exclude her from the category of good daughter. Kandiyoti’s (1988) concept of the *patriarchal bargain* offers one perspective to understand this ambivalence. Ayesha’s participation in care work for her mother is neither simple submission nor straightforward resistance. She negotiates within an unequal social structure that supplies the moral vocabulary through which she understands herself as a daughter. Being caring and responsible is a

way to receive recognition as a *good* woman even as it restricts the choices she experiences as morally available.

Ayesha’s domestic sphere establishes the first pillar of the Three Cs of patriarchy, that is, a patriarchal social system where care generates obligation. It is the care that acquires hegemonic legitimacy and regulates women’s choices without explicit coercion. Moreover, Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony explains that, in the absence of any obvious patriarchal authority, Ayesha finds herself compelled to sacrifice her desires and be the “good daughter” who only recognises another’s need before her own. Bellacasa’s (2017) notion of the non-innocent nature of care is also obvious in Ayesha’s household where one’s genuine affection is turned into an unequal obligation for infinite time. Ayesha learns at home that to care for another is an obligation for women, and it is also a responsibility that makes the self a secondary object. We see that this understanding of care travels naturally into Ayesha’s later professional life and emotional relationships.

Recognition as a way to Control

Ayesha’s workplace offers an alternative to her domestic gender hierarchies. In order to support her family financially after her father abandons them, Ayesha starts doing multiple jobs, which is hard for her, but on the bright side, she values her professional independence (Minhas, 2007, p. 302). However, she soon realises that her professional space reproduces the same gender hierarchy and patriarchy that she has experienced in her home. However, at her workplace this unequal hierarchy is maintained by offering ambiguous forms of uninvited recognition, attention, and protection. We see that Ayesha’s employer Mr Khairuddin, gradually yet intentionally directs an ordinary everyday conversations about Ayesha’s work toward her marital status and how a husband “likes” a wife to be “fresh” and “available all the time” when he returns home (p. 37). He remarks that “unmarried women” are not “necessarily without men” in their lives (p. 37). This statement is not only sexualised but deliberately ambiguous. He opts a way where he does not issue any explicit command but still creates an atmosphere that makes Ayesha weigh her options wisely while calculating the consequences of confronting a superior. She finds herself trapped in a situation where her own phrase “walking the line” (p. 38) captures the ambiguity of her vulnerable situation because, if she objects, he can quickly retreat into innocence, but if she remains silent, the boundary would be crossed. Foucault’s (1977, 1978) notion of disciplinary power further clarifies this mechanism where power structures the field within which subjects act ambiguously rather than simply issuing prohibitions. Ayesha is aware that she cannot safely confront her employer without being accused of her compromised moral character; this itself is disciplinary in nature, as she has to anticipate consequences before acting in a normal way. Patriarchal control does not only regulate women’s behaviour but the forms in which resistance itself appears legitimate.

On the command of Mr K. the office peon repeatedly brings fresh tea for Ayesha. On inquiring, he tells her that Mr K. has ordered him to “take care” of her (p. 36). We see that an act that appears generous is performed to do with an attention to producing unwanted familiarity. We see that the gendered alternatives are clear in Ayesha’s encounters with men like Mr K. She is part of a patriarchal society where if she appears vulnerable, men rush to become “protectors” but if she resists too aggressively, she becomes that “pit bull” whom others want to “leash” (p. 39). In her office, Ayesha is also offered a chair as “recognition” of what makes her “special”. As she tries to confront, she is asked by Mr K. to “feel happy” because she is “appreciated” (p. 40). This bizarre situation shows the relationship between recognition and control. In fact, materially, the chair is an advantage, but relationally, it is a way to isolate Ayesha from her colleagues, thus making her the direct target of jealous and suspicious looks. Moreover, the closed office door of Mr K.’s office when Ayesha is present is an intentional act to create an illusion of “intimacy... that did not exist” (p. 40). Mr K. multiple acts in the name of recognition become a strategy for spatial control. Apparently innocent little favours and gifts that are offered to acknowledge Ayesha’s professional value manufacture a proximity she has not consented to. After weeks of hesitation, one day she decides to give an explicit response. She tells Mr K. that all his unasked and uninvited favours are making her feel “uncomfortable” (p. 41). Consequently, in a power structure where “no” is not allowed to function as a meaningful boundary, Ayesha faces the worst outcomes. First, Mr Khairuddin interprets her refusal as one form of ingratitude when Ayesha persists in setting boundaries; an expected “avalanche of work” (p. 41) descends upon her, making her feel physically and emotionally overwhelmed. Eventually, she recognises what is happening and most importantly, why it is happening. She realises

that she is “being waited out” (p. 41). The phrase *waited out* is theoretically relevant in this context because it demonstrates how control is exercised without an explicit order. Mr Khairuddin does not need to force submission; rather, he only needs to make resistance materially exhausting, as he does in Ayesha’s case, who explodes one day and decides to quit.

In Ayesha’s context, Foucault and Bellacasa become mutually illuminating in explaining Ayesha’s workplace condition. Foucault explains how institutional power works through hierarchy, time, surveillance, and unequal consequences, whereas Bellacasa complicates this account by showing how care and attention may participate together in such relations. Recognition is not inherently oppressive. It becomes regulatory mostly when the person offering it uses its legitimacy to establish a claim upon the recipient. In fact, Ayesha’s professional value becomes entangled with a personal claim over her body that she has not accepted. She is caught in a whirlwind, where at home, care becomes obligation while at work, care and recognition are used to control her. In both situations, the question of saying *no* is complicated because it shifts from whether Ayesha can say no to whether her *no* possesses sufficient social and institutional value. In both spaces, power operates most effectively when it does not identify itself simply as domination but comes from the places of care and recognition.

Need, Class, and the Reversal of Consent

In *Tunnel Vision*, Saad is Ayesha’s romantic interest. His presence in Ayesha’s life introduces a transformation because her desire is no longer organised primarily around another person’s need. Rather, she wants something for herself. Yet the novel demonstrates how difficult it is for her to recognise personal desire as autonomous. She refers ironically to the “cardinal sin of need” (p. 298), exposing the contradiction through which society can reject personal need while organising women’s lives around prescribed needs that involve marriage, family, tradition, and gender roles. Her relationship with Saad shows that in her patriarchal social system, even romantic love is not purely one’s private matter. She is part of a society where, in “real life” there are never simply two people who love each other; instead, there are “family, friends, neighbours, religion, caste, [and] country” and “everyone wanted, not demanded, a piece of the action (p. 298) that need to be considered. In fact, love is therefore embedded within social relations before consent can be considered. Ayesha’s internalised contradictions make this visible. Because of her mother, part of her believes she “didn’t deserve anything at all,” (p. 298) while, because of her father, another part believes that “men didn’t deserve women” (p. 299). This is how patriarchy works as it produces competing internal voices in Ayesha where one teaches undeservingness whereas another rejects male entitlement. This dilemma is evident when she recognises her love for Saad; she first asks whether Saad “deserve[s] my mother” (p. 299). This means that her own desire is mediated by maternal obligation. The problem is not simply whether she wants Saad, but whether she is entitled to want him when another person, her mother, needs her.

Class further complicates consent in Ayesha and Saad’s relationship. Ayesha can identify the gendered double standard through which her social mobility is interpreted. She sarcastically notes that her society sees “a man coming up the social ladder was showing initiative. A woman doing the same was a gold-digger” (p. 299). This means that gender plays an important part as the same action acquires different moral meanings within her society. Her relationship with a man from the upper middle class is also questioned even in her own household. She comments that, “Me and my sensible shoes were not welcome in his stiletto-governed world” (p. 299). Metaphorically speaking, her “sensible shoes” are a symbol of her awareness about her life situation in a man-made social world where informed women are neither needed nor welcomed. Moreover, this comparison makes class difference visible within Ayesha’s relationship with Saad. Against this social and economic background, Ayesha’s decision to propose directly to Saad becomes a significant act of agency. By doing so, she reverses the conventional grammar of heterosexual courtship in which the woman waits to be chosen. She chooses and proposes herself, thus breaking normal norms. Her agency is therefore unmistakable. However, she immediately wonders whether she has already confirmed Saad’s parents’ “worst fears” (p. 299) by exhibiting herself as a woman who is seeking social advancement. The irony is quite sharp in this situation as Ayesha exercises consent; patriarchal discourse threatens to transform her choice into clear evidence against her. She knows that her simple desire to marry a man of her choice can be recoded as greed and her initiative to propose Saad is an impropriety within their social circle.

It is important to understand that consent is not a single moment in which an autonomous individual says yes. Rather, it is a relational capacity, mostly dependent upon whether the subject has enough social, economic, emotional, and bodily freedom to define what a particular choice means and if that subject can withstand its consequences. As Ayesha proposes, Saad does not refuse directly but hesitates as he needs time to process her words. This hesitation is interpreted as refusal by Ayesha. Saad's reluctance can be read as a form of withdrawn consent that becomes implicated in patriarchal control. Seeing this situation on the surface level shows that Saad's decision to stay silent represents his legitimate exercise of choice. Just as Ayesha has the right to propose when she wants, Saad has the right to refuse if he does not want something. However, a diffractive reading complicates the apparent symmetry between their choices by considering the unequal social consequences associated with them. By proposing to Saad, Ayesha has already reversed the conventional gendered script where men choose, and women wait to be chosen. Saad's withdrawal and silence therefore restore the same normative position from which male consent determines the legitimacy of female desire. Saad's ambiguous refusal repositions Ayesha as the one who has overstepped the boundaries of acceptable femininity by expressing her wishes and desires openly. Looking from this perspective, *consent*, which is used by patriarchy to control female subjects, becomes a mechanism where its withdrawal causes the same patriarchal authority to be exercised. In Ayesha's case, Saad does not control, threaten, or coerce her but by withholding his consent has signalled her to return her to the same position in which her desire awaits male recognition. The irony of the whole proposal scene is that Ayesha exercises agency by proposing, whereas Saad exercises his authority by choosing to stay silent. In fact, Saad's refusal shows that consent is never merely an individual yes or no; its actual meaning is shaped by the gendered relations within which it is granted or withdrawn.

The Crash and the Ethics of Care

After Saad's reluctance in responding to Ayesha's marriage proposal, humiliated and enraged, Ayesha drives through Karachi and crashes her car into a truck. Ayesha's thought process before the car crash shows the gendered structures of Karachi's material landscape. In the morning, after her verbal encounter with her mother, Ayesha noticed during her commute to work that the city Karachi has been compared to a "whore" by poets and writers because of its "myriad fragrances, its graceful buildings". Ayesha agrees that it is a "whore, a man-made, man-driven, man-gratifying whore" (p. 45). Moments before her car crash, she again observes Karachi's "phallic monuments" that remind her that she has always been and will always be "just a woman in a man's world" (p. 07). The urban landscape of the city materialises the structures through which Ayesha is forced to negotiate her life. There is a water tanker that carries the slogan, "*Karachi ki aurat kamzor nahin, Karachi kay mard main zor nahin.*" (p. 08). This slogan apparently celebrates female strength, but it also romanticises endurance into a form of obligatory resilience. In Ayesha's case, her accident transforms her endurance into radical vulnerability. Ayesha's narrative that the accident was not her fault, "honestly," marks the transition from agency to her bodily dependence. We see that she, who has previously exhibited herself through agency, movement, work, desire, and resistance, is dependent upon strangers in an unconscious state. When she regains her consciousness, her first question to herself is: "why isn't anyone helping me?" She observes that "everyone was watching, but no one was helping" (p. 10), thus distinguishing spectatorship from care. To understand this situation, Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) account of care is helpful because care requires material responsiveness to vulnerability. By gathering around Ayesha, the crowd can claim concern or protect social propriety, but no one approaches to provide the bodily assistance Ayesha needs at the time. The distinction becomes more explicit when a man attempts to help, and the crowd immediately objects: "*but she's a woman! We can't touch her*" (Minhas, 2007, p. 10). The sudden articulation of prohibition conveyed through propriety rather than hostility shows that the crowd understands itself as protecting a social norm concerning women's bodies. However, it is one of those social norms that clearly fail to protect the real human/woman in danger.

The significant interruption in the pot car crash scene comes from the *hijra* who steps forward, pushes Ayesha's hair from her bloody face, and says, "*there there doll, your sister's here*" (p. 11). We see the visible contrast: the crowd says, "*we can't touch her*"; the *hijra* says, "*your sister's here.*" The crowd only protects propriety whereas the *hijra* responds to vulnerability. The *hijra*'s marginal position makes this reversal significant as she performs care that respectable members of the society refuse to do. It is important to note here that the *hijra*'s care is striking because it demands no

reciprocity, obedience, gratitude, or moral conformity. She does not demand Ayesha to become a “good girl” (p. 247) before helping her. The immediate caring response is offered to her bodily vulnerability. This scene provides the novel’s most significant alternative to patriarchal care, and that is care without possession. Protection is offered without claiming ownership, intimacy is shown without surveillance, and bodily assistance is provided without requiring Ayesha to become morally or socially indebted. Hijra’s intervention shows that care can move outside the patriarchal bargain when it responds to vulnerability without any intention of converting vulnerability into a claim upon the other.

Ayesha’s head injuries cause her to undergo a coma. This coma produces the novel’s most devastating irony. We see Ayesha’s body that is now stripped of consciousness, speech, resistance, and the capacity to negotiate or resist. Ayesha calls herself a “pretty. Pliant. Docile. Accepting” (p. 76) body that fulfils societal demands of a perfect woman. These descriptors bring the Three Cs of patriarchy into a single image. In a society of patriarchal control, the woman most easily recognised as acceptable is the woman who has become incapable of refusing. “Pliant,” “docile,” and “accepting” echo qualities that patriarchal structures have internalised in Ayesha throughout her life. At home, she has seen her mother as a good wife, which makes her, eventually, a good daughter who must recognise others’ needs; at work, compliance is easier to manage for her; in romance, she learns that female desire must remain socially intelligible; in public space, women’s bodies must be governed through propriety. Ayesha’s coma only literalises the endpoint of all these social expectations. In her comatose condition, she looks like an ideal woman whose capacity to resist has been removed. However, the novel does not present this condition as a simple victory for patriarchy. The presence of hijra interrupts the logic by providing immediate care when patriarchal communal respectability has failed. Hijra responds to vulnerability while preserving Ayesha as a subject. As far as the cause of this crash, Saad is concerned, Ayesha observes: “The whole time, I didn’t once think of Saad” (p. 12). This is because at the time of Ayesha’s greatest bodily vulnerability, care does not come from her romantic partner or a respectable male bystander, but it comes from a stranger marginalised hijra for whom care is a moral ethics and not a way to legitimate control.

Conclusion

This study has argued that in Shandhana Minhas’s *Tunnel Vision* (2007), care, consent, and control are not discrete or sequential actions within Pakistani patriarchal society, but they work as mutually constitutive registers through which patriarchal power is sustained. A diffractive reading of female protagonist Ayesha Siddiqui’s experiences demonstrates that authority is rarely secured through coercion alone; rather, it is secured precisely through entanglement of care, consent and control. This means that care supplies the affective vocabulary through which authority is legitimised and consent is manufactured within conditions already structured by unequal power. Consent is never simply given by the subject but is always already shaped by the circumstances. Moreover, control becomes durable precisely because it can present itself as protective, necessary, or loving. The three terms, care, consent and control, therefore, do not simply describe a linear progression from care to consent to control, but it is a recursive formation, in which care generates consent, consent conceals control, and control returns, repeatedly, in the guise of care.

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